

*Maria Racheva*

PRESENT DAY  
BULGARIAN  
CINEMA



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*Sofia·Press*





## CONTENTS

### I. FIRST STEPS

1. Beginnings. Subject-Matter and Characters . . . . . 7
2. Pallid Contemporary Themes . . . . . 17

### II. NEW THEMES AND GENRES

1. The Turning Point . . . . . 20
2. They Were Young . . . . . 27
3. The Thriller . . . . . 39
4. Comedy in the Bulgarian Cinema . . . . . 47

### III. ARTISTS AND STYLE

1. The Search for Style . . . . . 53
2. The Problem of the Creative Personality . . . . . 70

### IV. THE PRESENT OUTLOOK

1. Débuts and Promises . . . . . 89
2. The Man of Our Own Day in Recent Bulgarian Cinema . . . . . 101

### V. NOTES ON THE PROBLEMS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BULGARTAN SHORT FILM

109

## I. FIRST STEPS

### *I. Beginnings.*

#### *Subject-Matter and Characters*

What is the Bulgarian cinema of today? Which period of time does it cover? What artists and films characterize it? In search of an exact answer to these questions, trying to establish the truest characteristics of one or another artist or to find the historical roots of a film, one has to go back to 1950. For on March 20, 1950 the first Bulgarian film had its première, a film that was produced by the state-run national feature film studio. This is the date that can be considered the birthday of the contemporary Bulgarian cinema. Or it might be better to say, of the Bulgarian cinema in general.

7 Before film-producing equipment in Bulgaria was taken over by the state, it was owned by private persons who were in fact the producers, though the word, in its modern sense, hardly fits the case. The numerous film-making enterprises, which suddenly appeared and disappeared as rapidly, were the ventures of enthusiasts rather than the serious endeavour of film magnates, prepared to invest large sums in the film industry. These people treated their more or less casual

contact with the cinema as a hobby, or even as a sort of adventure. Becoming aware that the establishment of a national cinematography, capable of competing with the large Western firms, required many years and a great deal of capital, they quickly retired from the scene. This sort of attitude towards the cinema, considering its extreme dependence on funds and equipment, inevitably doomed the creative ambitions and efforts of even the most inspired enthusiasts. And yet such people did exist. One of them, Vassil Gendov, was an exceptional man, even by international standards. Neither poverty, nor hunger, gaol, ridicule or humiliation, could damp down his invincible desire to make films. The history of the Bulgarian cinema has on record curious little stories like the one about Gendov who had to sell his wristwatch and his wife's jewellery to pay the debts he had contracted in making one of his films. A persevering and ambitious man, he also had a strong sense of cinematic means of expression. This may be seen from individual fragments of his films. Though shot in a ludicrously primitive manner, they reveal the author's undoubted flair for a visual representation of life, which closely resembles that of Jacques Feyder and Clair during the 'twenties and 'thirties. *Bai Ganyo* (1922) and *The Slaves' Rebellion* (1933) are a case in point. Whole sequences are preserved from some films, individual shots from others, while nothing has remained of the rest. We know and judge them from the records of film studios and from the accounts of living witnesses. This is what the critic Georgi Stoyanov-Bigor had to say in this connection:

'I look at their portraits, already catalogued as museum pieces in the National Filmotheque:

Vassil Gendov, Zhana Gendova, Alexander Vazov, Vassil Poshev, Vassil Bakurdjiev, Simeon Simeonov. Portraits of dreamers, of Don Quixotes. . . . What did they make of their films? Were they out to really earn anything? Where were their studios and laboratories, how many were the cinema theatres in Bulgaria, what returns did they expect from the distribution of a single film copy and how far could these returns cover expenses?

‘. . . It would have been sad indeed if Bulgaria had not had its Don Quixotes. . .’

I should like to add that the prospects of our cinematography were really dim, for 15 years after Griffith and Eisenstein, five years after *The Great Game* and *The Grand Illusion*, and at the time of Welles’s *Citizen Kane*, it was shooting films with cameras whose noise was a cross between the clanking of a dilapidated sewing machine and the roar of a stone-crusher.

When all film-producing equipment was taken over by the state in 1948, luck gave way to security, enthusiasm to professionalism, and the film-makers by chance became film-makers by calling. This act launched the Bulgarian national cinema art on its speedy and surprising development. This is what film director Zahari Zhandov, a contemporary, wrote about it:

‘There was enthusiasm, and a fervent desire to keep up with the rest of the world, but all that there was to work with were a few Cinamo cameras, fit for a museum; but the cameramen literally fought one another for them. A newsreel had to be produced every week, and that was a great responsibility, but there was only the most primitive laboratory with wooden frames and tubs, and a technical “miracle”, the first Bulgarian

sound-recording apparatus, made by the pioneers Parlapanov and Popov, to produce it with. The outside world had to see and hear what was happening in Bulgaria. How many times did the fulfilment of this responsibility depend on the merest chance?

*Kalin The Eagle* was the first full-length film produced by the new state cinematography. As was to be expected, the film was received with unalloyed enthusiasm, and one should admit that for all the obvious naivety of the story, the crudity of the approach to the subject, and the primitive means of expression, *Kalin The Eagle* (created by scriptwriter Orlin Vassilev and directed by Boris Borozeanov, who had already had some experience) is quite a decent effort as far as Bulgarian historical films go.

. . . Kalin, nicknamed The Eagle for his remarkable courage, a rebel against the Turks, a fighter for the people's freedom, is exiled to Diarbekir, where he spends fifteen years. On his return to his country he realizes that the liberated Bulgaria differs profoundly from his preconceived idea of it. The country has embarked upon the road of the easiest accumulation of capital in order to become a partner on the European market. The suffering and oppression of centuries have been forgotten in this race for wealth and the rivers of blood shed for the freedom have been profaned. The authorities have forgotten about the heroes, their valiant deeds and wounds. . . . At the same time, however, the first socialist organizations begin to appear, propagating the ideas of equality and fraternity and offering ways and means of alleviating the fate of the poverty-stricken people. Kalin is faced with the reality of early 20th century Bul-

garia, and the makers of the film try to express the disillusionment of former fighters against the Ottomans, in the ideals for which they had fought and died.

The fact that *Kalin The Eagle* was the first production of the newly-established cinematography inspires respect and makes one wonder whether it does not set a kind of standard of artistic quality and ideological validity, as was the case with Buczkowski's *Forbidden Songs* in Poland and Rossellini's films in Italy. This is not the case, however, and the main reason for this failure seems to be the absence in the film of the seeds of the new things that the post-war period brought to Bulgaria: the rehabilitation of the country, the wholesale reconstruction of the industry and economy, the collectivization of farming, and mainly the reflection of all these events in the psychology of the people who had survived the war. In its conception, structure and content, *Kalin The Eagle* followed in the footsteps of prewar films of that genre and was only, perhaps, on a higher professional level.

The next feature film, *Alarm* (directed by Zahari Zhandov), immediately came to grips with all those pressing problems and situations which characterized the period, and tried to bring out the complex of facts which determined the psychology of larger and smaller groups of society. It was just this ambition to keep abreast of current issues that showed in *Alarm* the first disquieting signs of dogmatism and schematization in the Bulgarian cinema art which were typical of the period of the personality cult.

The scenario of *Alarm*, based on a play of the same name by Orlin Vassilev, describes the inner world of the retired tsarist officer Vitan



Lazarov, who, holding aloof from the political struggle, hopes to remain untouched by the vast social perturbations which occurred on the eve of the anti-fascist uprising of 1944. The tragedy of this man springs from the circumstance that the war enters his own home: his son Boris, also an army officer, pursues and kills communist guerrillas, while his son-in-law is a communist. Thus sketchily outlined, the story threatens to be too readily polarized between the three types of character — 'positive — neutral — negative', but in the rich fabric of the scenario, through well-developed dialogues and the varied mise-en-scène, the complicated inner conflict of the principal character is comparatively well presented.

This film marked the orientation of the Bulgarian cinema towards contemporary life — a subject that was soon neglected for quite a long time, and attracted the interest of film-makers once more only in the late 'fifties.

The screening of *Under The Yoke*, a novel of national importance for all Bulgarians, became an outstanding fact not only, and not even largely, because of the value of the original. In many respects this film outlined the ideas, subjects, and formal features that were to mark the line of development of Bulgarian film-making in the six following years.

I have the historical film in mind. A sufficient number of years had passed since the end of the war to view in proper perspective the bitter experiences and incredible suffering, the bloodshed and the meaning of the sacrifices. That period could have been used as a scale to see how events had shaped, both in their real and subjective dimensions, and the essence and size of



A frame from the film *Alarm*

the conflicts. Moreover, the logic of these considerations brought subjects from the war and occupation to the attention of film-makers. Affairs took approximately such a course in Poland, where Alexander Ford's *The Five of Barska Street* formed the backbone of an artistic school of cinema that later produced such film-makers as Andrzej Wajda, Jerzy Stefan Stawinski, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, Andrzej Munk, and films like *Ashes and Diamonds*, *The Real End of the Great War*, *Eroica*, and *Mother Joan of the Angels*.

The orientation towards historical subjects in the Bulgarian cinema had different roots, at least at the stage of development now under consideration. For, several years later, when the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had done away with the consequences of the personality cult in the USSR, and the April 1956 Plenary Session of the Bulgarian Communist Party had cleared the way for new, fresh developments and ideas in Bulgaria's social and cultural life, the film *On the Little Island*, which reflected that process, was made, becoming a milestone in the development of the Bulgarian cinematography.

But we shall return to it later.

The historical films of the 1952-56 period were not concerned with the recent past, the period of resistance against Bulgarian and German fascism. The central event in Ivan Vazov's novel *Under The Yoke*, on which the film was based, was the Bulgarian insurrection against the Ottomans in April 1876, and in the film *Heroes of Shipka*, the unbelievable heroism of the Bulgarian volunteers in the defence of the Shipka Pass against the attacks of the Ottoman army in the Russo-Turkish War of 1878. The film *Septembrists* dealt with the first anti-fascist uprising in the world, which broke out in Bulgaria in 1923. *Song of Man* is a biographical poem of the revolutionary poet Nikola Vaptsarov who was shot in 1942.

Compared with earlier efforts, these films demonstrate a considerable advance in professionalism in Bulgarian film-making: the story is ever more skilfully composed, the camera follows the subtleties of the author's subjective vision, the sound track is the expressive summing up



A frame from the  
film *Septembrists*



Ivan Bratanov  
as Father Andrei  
in *Septembrists*

of the whole thing. Yet these films are quite far from a direct and real portrayal of life and of human character. The psychological waverings of Vitan Lazarov and the desire of the filmmakers to grasp them in all their complexity, are increasingly replaced by schematically constructed situations with two opposing poles 'a good and an evil character'. Many shots of the different films come to resemble each other: the same close-ups of the strapping young fellow with his eyes trained on the future, whether the character is the rebel Boicho Ognyanov, the revolutionary Stefan, the poet Vaptsarov or a Shipka volunteer. And they all seem to speak the same lines! The unrelenting operation of the postulates of the personality cult related to art: exact portrayal of the typical hero, the hero as a representative of a definite socio-economic group, freeing the human being from its personalized, individual features — all this schematization did a great deal of harm to film art, and not only in Bulgaria. The film *Septembrists* (1954) by Angel Wagenstein and Zahari Zhandov received the Struggle for Freedom Prize at the festival in Karlovy Vary.

These are things of the past, for which it is not so difficult to provide explanations today. It is the good films like *Septembrists* which present a problem. In this particular film one feels the conflict between the creative efforts of the makers and even more so their conflict with the administrative organs which had to view it before release. The argument centred around the character of one of the leaders of the uprising, the village priest Andrei. The record of the discussion of the scenario reads in part: 'Father Andrei overshadows the chiefs of staff of the uprising. His cha-



racter is more powerful than that of the leaders. Father Andrei, an accidental product of the uprising, overshadows the character of Stefan. Father Andrei should be treated as an episodic character in favour of Stefan, Kolarov, Vera.' Father Andrei, the priest who rebelled against religion, was a strong and captivating personality, with a stormy temperament, florid language and typically Bulgarian kindness of heart. Thanks to his personal magnetism he played a considerable part in the uprising. This character placed the film-makers in a quandary.

'It seems,' critic Nedka Stanimirova wrote, 'that this hero cannot be fitted into artificial a priori schemes, since the prototype himself — a priest turned atheist and rebel, life itself with its infinite variety — is an argument against the speculative conceptions and narrow theoretizations about the typical.'

## *2. Pallid Contemporary Themes*

It is worth mentioning that several films attempting to deal with life in contemporary Bulgaria were also made in that period. All of them suffer in some measure from the schematization and conservatism already mentioned, though not to such an extent as the historic films. This phenomenon seems difficult to explain. Normally, the pressing problems in a given society or period clash with the greatest force in contemporary subjects, imperfections and difficulties being reflected in these clashes. Dynamism cannot always be polarized and simplified. Complexity in life requires complexity in treatment. It is



a fact that this kind of films give rise to heated discussions and are given the most controversial reception. This assertion could be backed by a number of phenomena from the history of any national cinema: the Italian neorealism, the 'angry young men' in Britain, the Czechoslovak 'wonder'.

Interest in the contemporary theme in the Bulgarian cinema produced quite a number of mediocre, unpretentious works like *It Happened in the Street* — the rather shallowly told story of the love affair between a chauffeur and a laboratory technician; *Adam's Rib*, dealing with the efforts of Bulgarian Moslem women to achieve equality, education and a chance for their own career in life; *Point One*, whose subject is children and our concern for their peaceful and happy future. Yet these films were enthusiastically welcomed by the general public who longed to see themselves and their own day on the screen. The great popularity of all these films brought to the fore the problem of 'cinema versus film-goer', a problem which, more or less acutely, accompanied the appearance of every new work of the film makers. Even as this is being written, in 1967, we are not only far from its solution but it seems that due to certain specific tendencies in the development of the world cinema, which also affect the Bulgarian cinema, the problem itself is becoming deeper and more complex.

But in 1956 it appeared straightforward enough. 'Give us films about ourselves,' the spectators demanded. 'Give us comedies,' was the nearly universal slogan. And film-makers decided to 'give'. *Two Victories* were born. If we look at the credits of the film, we shall notice that the effort of all the best established Bulgarian film artists

of the time had gone into its making: it was scripted by Angel Wagenstein, Vesselin Hanchev and Hristo Ganev, directed by Borislav Shara-liev and co-directed by Rangel Vulchanov, photographed by Georgi Georgiev, with the cast featuring the leading actors of the Sofia National Theatre, Nikola Popov, Assen Milanov, Nikolina Lekova and Andrei Chaprazov. Something like a mobilization proved necessary in order to produce the first Bulgarian film comedy. The main thing was to satisfy the wish of the audience. Here I should like to quote the words of scenarist Hristo Ganev:

‘Cinema art should demand from rather than give to the audience. It should demand co-operation in the search for truth, it should require trust, sympathy, and alertness. Only then will art be able to lead the audience out of the familiar well-trodden rut of its age-old emotions and ideas into a new interesting world where the unusual, though it does shock man’s mind and spirit, also provokes and activates it. When art gives, it lags behind, and when it demands it leads. Can socialist art give up this noble mission, its right to inquire, to look ahead, to discover new worlds? For art to give these up would be a total renouncement.’

I think that this quotation explains with sufficient clarity why, in spite of the crowding of so many interesting creative personalities in the cast and production staff, *Two Victories* was never a hit in Bulgarian cinema art.

That period, however, was lent importance by the art of another original creator: Dako Dakovski. He devoted his talent to a subject unexplored until then in contemporary Bulgaria — Bulgarian country life. His films following *Under Th*

*Yoke: Troubled Road* (1955), *The Last Supper of the Sedmaks* (1957) and *The Stoublen Lindens* (1960) deal with the fate of the Bulgarian peasant and the changes in his psychology caused by the new developments in Bulgaria, the construction of socialism and the pooling of land in co-operative farms. What set Dakovski's films apart from those of his contemporaries was his ability to show on the screen the unique character of the Bulgarian peasant with all his simplicity and exuberant vitality. His achievements were perhaps due to the subject-matter and also to the fact that Dakovski had reverted to the very springs of the national and the everlasting, in his attempt to portray his times against the historical and national background of our people. The life of the Bulgarian peasant and his strong and colourful character have almost always repaid the efforts of artists who sought inspiration there. No one could, however, deny Dakovski's observations their genuine freshness. The artist's untimely death in 1962 cut short his development and perhaps deprived our cinema of the most talented and devoted portrayer of the Bulgarian village.

## II. NEW THEMES AND GENRES

### *1. The Turning Point*

It was the year 1957. In Poland the so-called 'Polish school' through precise vivisection and painstaking examination of every happening, individual psychology or biography, were making a frank appraisal of the six years of German occu-

pation. Andrzej Wajda in *Generation*, *The Channel*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, with sad sympathy proceeded to shatter the myths of unshakable loyalty, unparalleled heroism, triumph in death. In the Soviet cinema, Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes Are Flying*, was being created, telling about how the war, beside bringing destruction and death, and calling forth patriotism and courage, inflicted upon millions of people incurable psychological traumas, upsetting their mental and moral balance. In Czechoslovakia, Jiří Weiss was to make *Romeo, Juliet and the Dark*, one of the most poetic stories of the struggle between love and death, and in Hungary Zoltan Fabri in his *Mr Hannibal*, *The Teacher* told about the tragedies of the innumerable little people, whom the war monster smashed between its fiery jaws before they were aware of it.

After the period when schematization and dogmatism dominated, when the films of all socialist cinematographies were marked by the thematic and stylistic clichés of the personality cult, a sort of 'rebirth' set in everywhere. It was manifested by each country finding ITS OWN treatment for its particular set of problems, and its own ways of expressing them in accordance with that particular country's artistic traditions. In all socialist countries, a period of analysis and re-evaluation of the cruel experiences of the war and occupation was under way. Bulgaria was no exception.

21

Completed at the end of 1957, *On the Little Island* appeared on the screen on May 5, 1958. The production staff responsible for it: scenarist Valeri Petrov, director Rangel Vulchanov, cameramen Dimo Kolarov, composer Simeon Pironkov, art director Hristo Neikov, with Ivan Kondov,



A frame from the film *On the Little Island* . . .



Naicho Petrov  
as Captain Stanev  
in *On the Little  
Island*

Konstantin Kotsev, Ivan Andonov in the main parts, worked together for the first time.

The desolate little island of St Anastasia in the Black Sea is fenced with barbed wire and plank walls. In the enclosure are wooden cabins. Participants in the September 1923 Uprising are exiled here. Dirty, ragged, unshaven men who have no faith in each other. The first thing that the film conveys is the stifling atmosphere of terror and cruelty, of hostility and distrust. It is no easy task to establish contacts and friendli-

From the film *On the Little Island*





ness between those men, or urge them to common action.

The story tells how four of them: The Doctor, an intellectual, Zheko, a carpenter, Costa Rica, a fisherman, and a high-school boy, make efforts to organize the escape of their comrades. They are ingenious: many plans are made and they all fail. The chief of the guard, Captain Stanev, is stupid, naïve and irascible, and the lighthouse keeper a cranky old alcoholic. These are the people on the little island.

Valeri Petrov's scenario circles around a tidy, logically built plot, closely woven together and psychologically motivated. There are no loose ends, no vagueness of situations, events, thought or actions of characters. Scenarist and director hand to the spectator the keys to reading all the implications, work out for him in detail their whole conception and views on one of the most important moments in the existence of the individual.

Well then, what is new in this conception? What are the elements that make *On the Little Island* a turning point in the development of the Bulgarian cinema?

The problem of heroism forms the basis of the film. What is an act of heroism, what sets it apart from an ordinary, everyday action and what are the circumstances that prompt it?

Taken in the abstract, the escape from a concentration camp is considered an act of heroism. Even the escape of an individual, to say nothing of the organization of a collective escape. The film's heroes are exiled communists, whose forced stay in the camp is not merely bad for them, but harmful to the cause to which they have pledged themselves. Their awareness of this is the fac-

tor that binds the four heroes together. An escape should be organized at all costs, it is a matter of life and death. The actual planning seems easier than persuading the rest of the prisoners. Indeed, if Costa Rica's original plan with the raft they built had been successful, the rest of the men would not have left with them. They were not yet ready ideologically and psychologically. To a lesser degree this is true of the other two attempts: of the Schoolboy and of Zheko. And when finally, left alone, the Doctor has nearly despaired, the revolt just happens spontaneously. The prisoners manage to escape. Then why were the deaths of the four organizers necessary?

The new approach of Petrov and Vulchanov was that their characters were conceived not mainly as leaders and organizers, but first and foremost as individuals. Let us compare it with, say, *Septembrists* (I look to *Septembrists* for my parallels because technically and as regards composition, it is a very satisfactory film and precisely its comparison with *On the Little Island* will make it possible to grasp the new approach to world outlook, the new ideas and artistic conceptions that *On the Little Island* introduced into the Bulgarian cinema). In *Septembrists* Stefan, Vera and Kolarov differ from the others in that they are leaders, and therefore the film's leading characters. Petrov and Vulchanov, however, have to explain to the audience why exactly Costa Rica, The Doctor, Zheko and the Schoolboy became the leaders. Naturally, the decisive factor proves to be the individual features of each one of them. For, instance, Costa Rica has a big heart and a wide range of action. The former quality enables him to judge people fairly, without prejudice, often charitably, and the latter kind-

les his untiring imagination, activeness and personal courage. The principle underlying the building up of the four characters can be illustrated by the popular saying to the effect that man's defects are the extension of his qualities. Costa Rica's courage verges on rashness and a propensity to take excessive risks, as well as a kind of haughtiness. Therefore, the hero builds a raft on his own and is discovered by the sentry. Costa Rica is shot down point-blank in front of the prisoners' eyes. The Schoolboy is an eager and romantic fellow, extremely modest and trusting. His modesty and shyness, however, verge on clumsiness and incompetence, and his trustfulness leads him to overestimating his own powers. He ventures to swim over to the shore without being a swimmer and that costs him his life.

Zheko is quick and resourceful, outspoken and witty. Sometimes he is apt to distrust people and to count too much on his own skill in dealing with every situation. He brilliantly directs the prisoners' performance and his own escape. He takes no account, however, of the unexpected course of events. One of the prisoners, an illiterate young Turk, suddenly starts singing, and shooting at the targets, behind which Zheko is hiding, begins ahead of time. So he is shot dead before the prisoners' eyes.

The Doctor is intelligent, with a strong and keen mind, considering all aspects of a situation, carefully weighing all pros and cons. This intellectuality plays a trick upon him: he fails to sense the exact moment when the time for the collective revolt has come. Yet the undertaking succeeds, while the Doctor, trying to thank the little girl with the goat, slips to his death from a rock. This last death appears at first sight arti-

ficial, arbitrary, unnecessary. But I think that like every real work of art, *On the Little Island* builds up its own artistic logic, springing from the atmosphere of the work, from the authors' method of expression, from their own angle of regarding the events described: a logic that obeys the laws of art.

I have finished my description of each hero with the same sentence: 'dies before the prisoners' eyes'. Rangel Vulchanov has shot a scene with a similar content several times, always with the same purpose. The success of the revolt is not due to mere chance. The protest in the hearts of men has surged up with each death. These deaths are precisely the strongest method of persuasion. They become key points as the idea of mutiny matures. They do play their part, though the scenarist and director do not declare or show it. They merely suggest it, giving us the clues to arrive at the idea independently. *On the Little Island*, unlike all our films preceding it, has this quality of the new type of cinema, which the critic Todor Andreikov formulated as follows: 'The new cinema has broad limits of style and genre, such is generally the modern cinema which bases its appeal to the spectator primarily on a hint, rather than on a statement of the obvious, on an implication rather than on a declaration or, most generally, on a suggestion rather than on a too graphic explanation of characters, ideas, conclusions, etc.'

## 2. *They Were Young*

*On the Little Island* introduced into Bulgarian cinema an entirely new aesthetics and style that conformed not only, and not primarily, with the

quests of world cinema, but was mainly an expression of the psychology of Bulgarian social life at the time. After 1956, more than a decade after the war and the establishment of socialism in Bulgaria, there came a moment of reconsideration, or rather of discovery of the true value and significance of the past of the war and the guerrilla struggle. The need for this re-evaluation was due not only to the new point of view — the distance in time, but also to the increased confidence of a people building its national independent economy, having eliminated illiteracy and reduced the high rate of mortality. All this could not but bring into existence an objective, unbiased appraisal of the past. There was a rediscovery of the annals of guerrilla warfare — full of sincerity, of deep faith and human sensitivity — in the dramatic and lyrical poetry of Veselin Andreyev and Hristo Karpachev. First fiction and then the drama launched an attack on the canonized interpretation of the war period, on the stereotyped representation of conflicts and polarisation of characters. A number of works appeared (among which Dimiter Dimov's novel *Tobacco* loomed large), which represented with passionate interest the complexity and numerous nuances of the situation, without assuming the role of infallible judges and moralizers. The cinema, one of whose most definite virtues is to keep pace with current problems, did not lag behind the general wave of progress. Several films, very close to each other in subject, style and artistic standard, marked a trend in the Bulgarian cinema, which I shall venture to call 'the recent past in the light of the present.'

It would not be superfluous at this point to discuss the staff of the Bulgarian cinematography

and the individualities of the different filmmakers.

The Bulgarian cinema inherited from the pre-war period three directors: Anton Marinovich, Boris Borozanov and Zahari Zhandov, and a few cameramen. Marinovich and Zhandov are still working for the cinematography. The rest of the staff are younger people, most of them graduates of the film institutes in Moscow, Prague, Warsaw and Budapest. Among them are Hristo Ganev, Angel Wagenstein, Hristo Piskov, Borislav Sharaliev, Vulo Radev, Borislav Pouchchev, Nikola Korabov, and Vladislav Ikononov. Two directors — Rangel Vulchanov and Binka Zhelyazkova — have majored in theatre direction at the Dramatic Academy in Sofia.

This rejuvenation of the production staff of the Bulgarian cinema doubtlessly left its imprint on several of the films which marked the beginning of the new stage in the development of the Bulgarian cinematography.

The film *Stars* (scenarist Angel Wagenstein, director Konrad Wolf, cameraman Werner Bergmann) occupies a very definite place among these anti-fascist films. Not primarily because the ideological and aesthetic values which the film defends are valid far beyond the borders of Bulgaria and of the socialist camp, but rather because of the attack which the film launched against schematic patterns of any description, and which is significant for the scenarist's strict sense of proportion and artistic insight. The film is a co-production of DEFA and the Feature Film Studio in Sofia. The director's and cameraman's work is extremely precise, clear and well-sustained, building up the appropriate atmosphere for



a lyrical story with overtones of heroism, but what really made *Stars* an important event in the Bulgarian cinema is the script.

If one of the everlasting themes of art — heroism, is rid of the old clichés in *On the Little Island*, *Stars* is built on the theme of the grandeur of the TRAGIC. It treats the individual's personal tragedy resulting from the tragedy of war.

The Nazi n. c. o. Walter is very reminiscent of Hemingway's characters, whom the First World War cast into the abyss of resignation, despair and disillusionment, but the qualitatively new element in Wagenstein's work is his grasp of more aspects of the individual's hopelessness. Walter not so much hates war as he bodily opposes it with the weapon of his human love for the Jewish girl Ruth, whom he fails to save from the Oswiecim concentration camp. But this failure, absolutely regular in accordance with the artistic and philosophic truth which was the scenarist's chief end, does not aim directly at leading the abstract humanist Walter to the position of an overt struggle against fascism. It is not Walter whom the makers of the film are trying to win over, but the spectator. It was his active share that they sought to enlist in shattering passive utopianism and abstract love of man. Walter is quite helpless as an intellect and a socially conscious person. 'Swinging a chain round his finger, he wanders about the market of the small Bulgarian town, a stranger to his own people, with no understanding for the others,' wrote Stefan Vassilev in his review of the film. But just seen through the psychology of men like Walter, the true monstrosity of fascism is laid bare, not only as a homicidal system but as a threat to all that is *homo sapiens*. It is to this



Sasha Krousharska (Ruth) and  
Jürgen Froriep (Walter) in *Stars*



sweeping philosophical generalization that the film owes its tremendous success abroad. This is what Louis Marcorelles wrote in *France Observateur* of May 1959:

‘The masterpiece of the Eastern cinema has this time come to us, oh what surprise, from Bulgaria and East Germany who joined their efforts to produce one of the most lyrical testimonies of the blameworthiness of the German people and of the doom of the Jewish race: *Stars*, of Konrad Wolf. A convoy of deported Greek Jews crosses Bulgaria. A German n. c. o., a good boy, meaning no one any harm, discovers through a love affair with a young Jewish girl the terrifying reality of the war machine which he serves without batting an eyelid.

‘By its form, the film brings us back to the golden age of a tradition which revolutionized the world thirty years ago. But there is nothing gratuitous in this. The German technical genius and its externally displayed idealism finds its most adequate expression in Wolf’s work.

‘The authors’ denunciation cannot prevent them from plunging us into the most Manichaeian (in the best sense) universe, where the doom hanging over the Jewish race becomes to a certain degree the doom of mankind.’

The fate of young Bulgarians during the German occupation and their part in the Resistance is the main subject of several films, which not only mark, by virtue of their artistic level, the highest summits of Bulgarian film achievement during the 1960-62 period, but because of it, continuing the tradition of *Stars*, pushed the development of the Bulgarian cinema forward. In comparison with its earlier efforts it went fur-

ther in its penetration of the individual's psychology, and in showing it as a facet of the country's social and political situation.

This is, to a large extent, due to the fact that the makers of these films belonged to that same generation and that the echoes of their own experiences sounded in their work, each of them making as it were a confession of his own youth. *First Lesson* (1960) is the second production of the team already familiar from *On the Little Island*: script-writer Valeri Petrov, director Rangel Vulchanov, cameraman Dimo Kolarov, composer Simeon Pironkov. It is the story of the love of a Romeo (Pesho) from the other side of the tracks and a Juliet (Violetta) from the centre of Sofia, rendered tragic by the appearance of mounted gendarmes and the launching of police raids in 1942, stifled by class prejudices and the antagonism of society. It begins lightly, jokingly, with a little white cloud, a kite and a song. Gradually, however, faint dramatic notes, growing ever more distinct, run through the lyrical poem of youth and love; Pesho and Violetta have to battle ever more fiercely for their love and lose it, in the clashes with the times and society. The breathless search for a 'no man's land' is a fiction which shatters in the shots and yawning doors of the police trucks. Love remains unfulfilled. The poem is drowned in tears, ending in a magnificent final scene, perhaps unequalled for expressive power in the Bulgarian cinema. Generally, as regards its style, the skilful blending of theme, plot, means of expression, symbolism and associations of the visual image, sound and music, *First Lesson* is a proof of the maturing of the personal style and conception of film art of the team which made its bow with *On the Little Island*.

This matter will be more fully considered in the next chapter.

On the other hand, *First Lesson* is an example of national, earthy, in the best sense of the word, clarity of theme, of the Bulgarian spirit which strongly marks every character, every shot and every line. This national colour defies description, it is in the very fabric of the film and marks it with the stamp of uniqueness. And one can only regret that in their next film — *Sun and Shadow* — Petrov and Vulchanov in aspiring to master new spheres of philosophic and intellectual thinking on a universally human plane, unexplored by the Bulgarian cinema before them, gave up national originality and colour to a great extent.

*Poor Man's Street* (1960), directed by Hristo Piskov, though cast against a different background, in a sense repeats the theme of *First Lesson*. The love of the schoolgirl Katya and the underground militant Peter is not troubled by any inner perturbations. The inner complexity and many-sidedness of Valeri Petrov's characters are conspicuously absent here. But the range of characters and types living in the poor suburban street is rich and colourful. The story of these people, crushed by poverty, longing deep down in their souls for a better life, is told smoothly and competently. The work makes no claim to be a truly modern, poetic film like *First Lesson*, for instance, but takes an honourable place among the above-mentioned films with its absolute sincerity and directness and with the scenarist's and director's active involvement in the story.

It seems to me that precisely the authors' involvement becomes the decisive quality which determines the high standard of films like *We*





Finale (the separation of Pesho and Violetta) of the film *First Lesson*





*Were Young* (1961). The story of the young conspirators taking part in an anti-fascist sabotage group is so deeply felt by the authors (scriptwriter Hristo Ganev and director Binka Zneliyazkova) that involvement with them becomes a new quality. The meaning of the story does not remain self-sufficient, it does not just say: this was what these people were like, and they died in the name of the future generations. The film polemizes with the present to which it is addressed. It says, with great delicacy, with forceful and pure conviction that youth has its value and meaning when it is filled with the awareness of something 'great' in the life of every young man. For Dimo and Veska, the 'great' thing is the struggle. What is it for us, the following generation, however? This is the question that the film of Ganev and Zneliyazkova asks us. Even the death of the two heroes is beautiful, filling us with respect and faith. In this sense the film is a serious contribution to the current discussion of the character and psychology of modern youth in world films. It is a strong and convincing contribution because it is a work of talent by people who were contemporaries and comrades of such young people as the characters, Veska and Dimo.

The film's means of expression are powerful, though an extremely sparing use is made of them. Let us quote what the critic Yako Molhov wrote on the subject:

'Stroke after stroke, hint after hint, action after action, gesture after gesture, metaphor after metaphor, circumstance after circumstance — the story proceeds evenly and calmly. But everything is permeated by a dramatic undercurrent and more is revealed than is written or announced.

Such is Hristo Ganey's style. His manner as a dramatist seems miserly. He has no use for long descriptions, lyrical digressions, prying into the psychology or the past or guesses at the future of the heroes. The most important features of the characters are shown while they are acting before our eyes. And at the same time they tell us more about themselves. They compel us to place ourselves in their position, to share their experiences, to appreciate the importance of what, for them, is fate.

'The characters do not philosophize because they have no time for it, but we spectators do, because the young people's story, which scenarist and director tell us so sparingly, prompts us to. The philosophical implications are in the script.'

The film *We Were Young* received international recognition and a number of distinctions. With *Stars* and *Sun and Shadow*, it brought Bulgaria the greatest number of international awards, i. e. a gold medal at the Second Moscow Film Festival (1961), and first prize at the First International Festival in Colombia (Cartagena, 1964). The other two films have received the following distinctions: *Stars* — the special prize of the jury at the Cannes Festival (1959), a gold medal at the Youth Festival in Vienna (1959), first prize and an honorary diploma at the festival in Edinburgh (1959), the prize The Gold Copy of the Head of Palenque at the Festival of Festivals in Acapulco (1960), first prize at the Lille Festival (1960); *Sun and Shadow* — a medal for an experimental film and the prize of FIP-RESSI at the Festival in Karlovy Vary (1962), the prize of film magazines at the San Francisco Festival (1962), 'The Parents' Prize' at the international film meeting in Cannes (1963), the

posthumous John F. Kennedy Award at the Second Peace Film Festival in Los Alamos.

*We Were Young* follows the trend which we called 'the recent past in the light of the present.' *Captured Squadron* is another example of the same trend. The story begins with the capture of the members of an anti-fascist combat group and ends with their execution. Nothing very eventful happens in Emil Manov's scenario. Even the scene with the communists' appearance in court is devoid of details: it merely informs the audience about the sentence. Yet the film has an important psychological impact. Hristo, who has weakened and confessed, gradually, with the active help of the others, recovers, matures and meets the death that inevitably awaits him proudly and confidently like the rest of his comrades. In actual fact director Doucho Moundrov does not even try to create a group portrait, whose individual components, powerful and profound personalities, might present to the spectator a microscopic view of an entire world. The authors have consciously rejected this method as it has repeatedly proved its fruitfulness in the cinema. And with good reason. *Captured Squadron* is a film about the power and grandeur of an idea — the communist idea. The audience arrives at this conclusion by witnessing the deep faith, conviction and devotion of the characters. Scenarist and director base their effort on a very interesting thesis. One of the unwritten laws of psychology in art is to seek the element of HUMANITY and the category HUMAN in the frailty of man. The rejection of an idea, fear and meanness often become the springs of a great tragedy, lending a deeper meaning to a work of art. The authors of *Captured Squadron* set out from it rather than

end with it. Hristo's strength fails him, he cannot hold out any longer, and confesses in police headquarters. From that moment on, he grows into a real man. He goes through the agony of losing faith in himself, of despairing, of self-reproach, finally to achieve an inner balance, a harmony between other people's attitude towards him and his own self-confidence.

The method, documentary in style, rhythm and atmosphere, which the film-makers have chosen, further clarifies the theme. In this sense *Captured Squadron* sets a standard in the Bulgarian cinema.

### 3. *The Thriller*

The first Bulgarian thriller film, *The Traces Remain*, based on the novel by Pavel Vezhinov, was shot six years after the official release of the first Bulgarian film *Kalin The Eagle*. Its enormous success with the audience showed that a highly necessary film genre had come into being. The heroes were children and the discovery of the criminal came as a reward for their perseverance and cleverness. For what was really fascinating in the film was their game itself, rather than the final result, whether negative or positive. For all that *The Traces Remain* tried to follow in the footsteps of the best examples of the genre. Of course, the enthusiasm of the audiences was hardly justified by the film's artistic or technical level. Here is what critic Nedelcho Milev wrote about it in 1963:

'It would be naïve to try and idealize the first attempts in this genre. They were all faltering,

handicapped by the fetters of a triviality which we have yet to get rid of. Under such conditions the socialist crime film could not appear overnight — least of all in Bulgaria, where the seventh art was still in search of an identity in every sense. The start was uncertain and very far from attaining full artistic value.

‘Primitivism painted the whole variety of life in black and white alone. The characters were sharply and clumsily divided into good and bad. And the range of subject-matter of the crime films from the moment of their appearance in Bulgaria became limited between two alternatives: either it was a clash between spies and militia, or the disclosure of sabotage on a class basis. These formed the frame for an extremely convenient dramaturgical plan, to be explored ad infinitum for the mass production of thrillers.

‘But the truth about life could not be fitted into the new, hastily manufactured patterns, imposed upon the crime genre. They proved just as unacceptable as the old ones.’

It seems to me that this statement gives an idea of the difficulties and prejudices with which the newly born genre had to grapple. Since the expansion of the genre and thematic range of the Bulgarian cinema was imposed not only from without, i. e. by the need of the public for a cinema of entertainment, but also from within — as a result of the growth and increasing creative stability of the young Bulgarian cinematography, the creation of new genres had to be approached in all seriousness with a thorough knowledge of the rules of the genre.

As is known, every film genre has its rules. We shall not list the rules of this particular genre here, for essentially they are similar to those of

crime literature. With one exception which is not unimportant: the theoreticians of crime literature maintain that the plot should be constructed in such a manner as to enable every reader to solve the mystery himself, if he ideally compares and assesses the facts at his disposal.

The cinema, because of its specific features (a rapid succession of episodes and impossibility of turning back) precludes the above condition. The spectator has no time to work out the meaning of facts at the rate they are brought to his knowledge. But in films a person SEES the characters described and their faces and behaviour will always suggest something to him. This leads to the 'false scent' trick. It is almost the whole basis of the film *The End of the Road* (script Pavel Vezhinov, director Anton Marinovich, cameraman Georgi Georgiev). The camera successively brings to the fore the three characters implicated in the laboratory experiments at a research institute, until finally it reveals the guilty one — the fourth.

The Polish scenarist and director Aleksander Scibor-Rylski claims that it is impossible to invent anything new in terms of plot. Everything that might seem new has already appeared somewhere else. This is especially true of the crime film. But within the framework of the set pattern, the content may vary in meaning, structure and effect. For example, in the second part of a crime story there is usually a series of episodes with pursuit, fighting, shooting, etc. In the crime productions of the West this part is usually of considerable length, done with great technical skill and variety of effects. In the Bulgarian films of this genre this element is practically absent. The lack is compensated for, however, by an in-



crease of psychological interest (although how successful this is is a different matter). Most frequently the conflict between opponents takes place on an intellectual plane, as, for instance, in *On the Eve of the 13th*. The discovery of a supplementary psychological factor often displaces the normal centre of the story. Recently the Bulgarian cinema has been making increasing use of this method. It is the basis of the two finest (in my opinion) examples of the genre: *The Gold Tooth* (script by Kosta Spassov, direction by Anton Marinovich, camerawork by Emil Rashev) and *The Inspector and the Night* (scenarist Bogomil Rainov, director Rangel Vulchanov, and cameraman Dimo Kolarov).

In *The Gold Tooth*, if we had known from the start that the main character, an honest officer of the royal army, was a criminal by compulsion, we should have followed the story about him out of interest not because of WHAT is happening, but WHY. We should have waited for the outburst of the pent-up grief, bitterness and mortification of this strong man so cruelly tormented by adverse circumstances. Here the complications of the crime story remain of lesser importance. And although it did not occur to the authors (or perhaps they found it unacceptable) to combine crime and the psychological genre in just this way (it is actually a fairly frequent combination), *The Gold Tooth* remains an original work, revealing unexplored possibilities for the development of the genre in Bulgaria.

Bogomil Rainov has adopted essentially the same approach in his script for *The Inspector and the Night*. Rainov decided to focus the narrative on the personality of the detective. But it is not just the mechanical centre holding together



Georgi Georgiev in *The Gold Tooth*

he threads of the plot. The inspector is our contemporary, and the author wants to tell us about him, about his daily life, his work and his problems. Through his eyes we see how he goes about his work which lends meaning to his life. Once again the crime story is subordinated to the psychological element. Its development is revealed to the spectator and to the inspector simultaneously; the spectator is enabled to solve the mystery alone. This somewhat unusual point of view, the method of the author lends the film the flavour of something on a higher plane, I would say more intellectual than our customary idea of a thriller. The inspector, a man of keen wits and rich intellect, emotionality and imagination, presents to us his adventures, if I may call them that, from a subjective point of view. Even the crime interest proves false in the end. The supposed murder proves to have been a suicide. But what comes to light while clues to the crime are sought is even more interesting. A group of people with their lives all tangled up, people looking for a way out, for an ideal. It is the inspector's tragedy that for them he is the embodiment of the ideal. It is no chance, even from the point of view of the story, that he becomes a father confessor to all of them.

Here director Vulchanov's choice of the actor was important. He cast as the Inspector the comedian Georgi Kaloyanchev, a genre character actor in all his earlier parts. In this role, Kaloyanchev demonstrated the intellectuality of character that was required, while with his innate directness and simplicity he gave warmth to Bogomil Rainov's hero, somewhat too prone to speculation. *The Inspector and the Night* contains other such features, with a claim to being dis-



Georgi Kaloyanchev in *The Inspector and the Night*

coveries in the genre, features that make it one of the few significant films of the Bulgarian cinema of entertainment.

The film *The Man in the Shade* (1967) is no doubt the most successful example of the genre as regards the construction of the plot, the achievement of a specific rhythm, the wide scope of action in time and space and the departure from the exclusively speculative and psychological level of the denouement. However, the authors have been unable to try for something new, unused so far. They were carried away by the technical possibilities of the genre and their success is mainly in this direction. But I think that *The Man in the Shade* was in this sense a very necessary film. Only after it had successfully tackled the crime film, could the Bulgarian cinematography go on to develop an interesting and so far unexplored genre — the crime science-fiction film. One of the reasons for this omission is the poor representation of the genre in Bulgarian literature, where most of the examples achieve nothing more than a kind of satire of familiar mores. The form of science-fiction becomes an allegorical way of writing about existing things, rather than a genre in its own right. Naturally the very spirit of the time gives rise to an increased interest in this genre, and not in literature alone. This fact is a proof that the technical and formal improvement of the crime film will be a condition (though not by any means the only one) for the appearance of the Bulgarian science-fiction film.

#### 4. Comedy in the Bulgarian Cinema

There is another aspect of the cinema of entertainment that we have to consider — the film comedy. It appeared as late as 1956, with the film *Two Victories* (script Vesselin Hanchev, Angel Wagenstein and Hristo Ganev, director Borislav Sharaliev). Of course, this is not to say that the comic element was absent from earlier films, that it did not exist in the very fabric of the films of other genres. But *Two Victories* was the first comedy *par excellence*. It was conceived and constructed with all the rules of the genre faithfully observed, and was shot with the suitable 'character' actors. After it, however, the Bulgarian cinema produced very few 'pure' comedies.

If we consider a series of film comedies of world fame, we shall notice two things: first, they all contain in their conception the element of derision, condemnation, even REJECTION of something or someone; and second, individual artists tend to specialize in the genre. Not every film-maker can produce a comedy. And if we look at the names of the three scenarists of the first Bulgarian comedy, we are struck by a paradox — in their other works two of them (Ganev and Wagenstein) show no affinity to comedy, satire, or parody. Was it strange then that *Two Victories* failed to become the 'first swallow' of good Bulgarian film comedy? Yet it posed a number of theoretical problems mainly concerned with defining the limits of the genre.

It also posed the problem of what is decisive in defining the comedy genre — the content or the form and style (also considering the way of looking at things, the approach adopted).



have always tended to think that the form or style is the decisive factor. For a tragedy or drama could be built on the prejudices of a social group, on careerism, on an inferiority complex, or envy, but so could a comedy and a satire. It seems to me that the Bulgarian makers of film comedies tend to underestimate the importance of this fact. In most cases they seem to think that it is enough to have a humorous plot, and the rest will come of itself. An example of this view are the films *Favourite No 13*, *Master of All Trades*, and *The Ancient Coin*.

. . . A football team is in search of a star. They decide to engage the centre-forward of a provincial team, who is a good and honest young man, reluctant to sell his sportsman's honour for money. His twin brother, a lover of adventure and easy fame, decides to profit from the situation. The physical resemblance of the twins becomes the source of a series of misunderstandings, which keep the story of the film going.

. . . A young university graduate refuses to take up his post in the provinces and prefers to remain in the capital, at whatever cost. He tries a number of professions, during which he has occasion to meet various character: bureaucrats, swindlers, good-for-nothings, etc.

. . . A historian from Berlin, an enthusiastic numismatist, pursues a Bulgarian girl, because he is interested in the old coin she wears, and only later, in herself. On his way, distracted by the pursuit, he fails to get the required immunity shots at the frontier, thus breaking the Bulgarian medical regulations. Two medical officers, incredibly stupid and clumsy, are therefore at his heels. . .

The plots of the three films, thus sketchily

outlined, give an idea of the insistence of Bulgarian makers of comic films on the compulsory comic plot. Concentrating on the humorous side they lose interest in a more thorough treatment of problems incidental to their material and in more subtle character drawing. And these are precisely the things that would have lent an original, individual, local sense to the commonly accepted structural schemes, plots and gags.

From the film *Favourite No 13*



For example, *An Incredible Story* (scripted by Radoi Ralin and directed by Vladimir Yanchev) explored these possibilities and has been quite successful. This is mainly due to the script itself, written by the leading Bulgarian satirist and poet.

The originally and vividly composed scenario has provided the director with the material for a very compact film story, in which the dynamism of the verbal witticism and the gag is well balanced by a lyrical digression. For the first time in Bulgarian film comedy the authors have tried for the widely used method of ECCENTRICITY of situation, eccentricity of portrayal. There is complete correspondence between the authors' conception and the actors' interpretation. The cast of the film includes a team of outstanding Bulgarian actors, well known for their performance in theatre comedy primarily, but also in film comedy.

A review of the films that are officially considered 'comedies' will no doubt give a far from complete picture of the treatment of the comic in the Bulgarian cinema. For the reasons I outlined above, an analysis of the comic element in 'non-comic' films would perhaps provide a more complete picture and a more solid basis for speculation. This is what the critic Bozhidar Mihailov had to say in this connection:

'It was actually the comic elements in Bulgarian non-comedy films that marked the most outstanding successes of our cinema in the sphere of comedy. The paradox is only apparent and can be easily accounted for. *Knight without Armour*, *The Inspector and the Night*, *The Blond Man and the Turtle-Dove*, *The Longest Night* (or if we go farther back in the history of the Bulgarian



The scene with the letters from *An Incredible Story*

cinema we might add *The Last Supper of the Sedmaks* and *It Happened in the Street*) have precisely those qualities that are lacking in most of our 'pure' film comedies: rich and complex characters, a dramaturgy of more profound conflicts, more significant problems. It is true that the comic in these films is just a supplementary element, but it enriches characters that are already full and living. Here the success of the whole becomes a success of the elements of which it is composed.'

Humour in these films appears in the wake of a MULTIPLICITY OF MEANING. Humour is the reverse side of drama and tragedy. In the

films mentioned above, as well as in many others, the authors have succeeded in grasping the complex interrelation between the serious and the comic, and their interpenetration in all its nuances. This trend is especially strong in Valeri Petrov's scenarios. In them comedy is inseparable from drama, and has a wide range: from the slight gentle smile of sympathy, through irony and mockery, to cutting parody. But the limits between them are barely noticeable. I shall cite one of the most expressive, though laconic, episodes of *On the Little Island*: a sea-gull soils Captain Stanev's hat while he is delivering a most pathetic speech. He takes out his pistol and shoots it dead. The comic situation suddenly develops into one of the most profoundly tragic symbols of the film (a little later Captain Stanev shoots Costa Rica, wishing to show off his sense of humour).

In Valeri Petrov's scripts what is pleasant and agreeable is always funny. Pesho and Violetta in *First Lesson* are all the time balanced on the edge of comedy. But it is a kindly, good-natured laughter the author reserves for them; it has sharper notes in his treatment of the 'boss' Stamov, Vanyo's father in *Knight without Armour*, a pedantic bureaucrat full of his own importance, who sets a high store by his authority and public opinion of himself.

In Bogomil Raino's *The Inspector and the Night*, the whole outlook of the Inspector is based on a slightly ironic attitude to everything around him.

Why not, after all, people are a little funny in their everyday life! What is more, the Inspector does not spare himself. He, too, is involved in this constant play of small vanities, in which



everyone occasionally tries to seem different from what he actually is. The youngest artists active in the Bulgarian cinema show a particular affinity towards such a viewpoint, towards a rather remote attitude to their characters. And there is more to it than just the mentality of the period and a sensibility typical of their generation. Modern cinema has no use for any differentiation of genres. I think that this is the expression of a particular type of realism — let us face things as they are, and recreate them in all their complexity, without the pedantic preliminary selection which often deprives the material of its flesh and blood, and restricts creative invention within the narrow limits of a preconceived thesis.

### III. ARTISTS AND STYLE

#### *1. The Search for Style*

So far it is the thematic and philosophical features of the Bulgarian cinema during the 1957-62 period that have mainly been discussed. The aspects in which the subject of the recent anti-fascist past appeared on the screen have been considered. But it seems to me that without the new forms of cinematic expression, absent in the earlier Bulgarian films, and the new stylistic features which were introduced with *On the Little Island*, it would be impossible to speak of a transition to a qualitatively new stage. Let us start from the first step in the making of a film: writing the scenario.



A most cursory glance through a Bulgarian scenario leaves the impression that it is constructed like a work of fiction. It is a tradition which historically goes back to the Bulgarian novel. The narrative proceeds smoothly, it is well motivated, with strong logical links and inter-relations. The characters are gradually formed and develop as new and new features enrich them. Even if they differ in the number of events occurring in the story, this kind of scenarios are made up of self-contained episodes following each other like the links of a chain. The writers set most store by the word: its colour, its nuances, its sound and tendency to occur in collocation with other words. Therefore, these scenarios (for *First Lesson*, *Stars*, *Two under the Sky*, *We Were Young*) make very interesting reading. This tradition of the so-called fiction scenario is so strong in the Bulgarian cinema that even Valeri Petrov, a leading poet with an established original style, saw fit to adapt his method to it. He wrote for the cinema in the same way as his colleagues, though placing a strong emphasis on more poetic elements, such as metaphors, similes and rhythm.

This style of scriptwriting has its good qualities and its defects. If the director has a sufficiently keen feeling about his conception of the future film, the narrative scenario offers him great possibilities to discover the most precise detail necessary for the creation of a certain scene. An example that comes to mind is a scene from *First Lesson*: the death of the hunchback University lecturer. The bullet overtakes him at the corner kiosk we are familiar with, where he slumps down in a heap. And here the scriptwriter's suggestion is for the camera to tilt downwards, catching some inscriptions and posters, until



The death of the University Lecturer,  
from the film *First Lesson*

the strangled spectator unexpectedly discovers the dead man. The text in the script for what is to be read on the kiosk wall runs as follows:

‘Rain or shine — for every dye  
Indantren is your best buy.’

I. G. Farbenindustrie

‘*The Children of Sodom*, a family drama full of erotic emotions and wild passions. Pachev Cinema.

‘A lecture of the eminent German philosopher, Professor Wolfgang Kundermann, on “Kant and His Moral Imperative”.

‘*Signal* — exact and interesting information from all fronts on the victorious war waged by The Axis.

‘The physical strength of a Bulgarian. Demonstrations by Peter Fereshtanov in the Royal Cinema’

The camera has reached the bottom of the kiosk. Down there, below the tasteless posters, lies the hunchback. Death seems to have made him even smaller physically and greater spiritually. His broken spectacles are fallen on the ground. His hand still clutches the pistol, looking so incongruous next to his puny figure. A human life is cut short. What has made him fight when even the victory of his ideal could not have brought him personal happiness? And so on. The director is aware that counterpoint is sought through a concrete visual image. From the many alternatives offered by the scriptwriter, he chooses only the last one: the physical strength of the wrestler Peter Fereshtanov, supplementing the inscription with a picture, to make the counterpoint clear even though one does not read the text.

In the case of films like *Captured Squadron* the

chronological description of events in the script merely provides the framework around which the director builds up the visual fabric of the film.

Consequently, when the director is both CLEAR about the author's conceptions and shares them, this type of scenario proves extremely effective. This fact seems to justify similar efforts, for to this day scenarios are written in this way and the several attempts to create something in the 'stream of consciousness' style, to fight clear of spatial and temporal relations (as, for instance, *A Chronicle of Sentiments* and *A Taste of Almonds*) have not been very successful. As I see it, the reason is the existing link with Bulgarian prose which is still committed to a well-constructed plot related in chronological order. Several recent efforts to depart from this practice — the long stories of Milcho Radev and Georgi Markov — have been made under the influence of scriptwriting abroad rather than in Bulgaria.

The defects of the narrative scenario are an extension of its positive qualities. As it is logical to suppose, this kind of scenario leaves much less creative freedom to the director than the one with the dialogues merely sketched and sites of action tentatively marked, but completely lacking description. In the Bulgarian cinema, however, films that have proved a success were usually scripted with a definite director in mind and with his collaboration. Thus Wagenstein teamed with Wolf in *Stars*, and with Sharaliev in *Two Under the Sky*, Petrov with Vulchanov in *First Lesson*, *On the Little Island*, and *Sun and Shadow*, Ganev with Zhelyazkova in *We Were Young*. The latest successful film *The Sidetrack* shows that we are hardly about to witness any

radical changes in the style of Bulgarian scriptwriting, for the scenario of the well-known poetess Blaga Dimitrova in no way differs, structurally or stylistically, from the works of her colleagues, whom we called the creators of the narrative scenario.

The situation in scriptwriting being what it is, there is no alternative but to suggest that the new elements in style resulted from new methods of direction. And while Bulgarian literary tradition exists and scriptwriting is its offshoot, there is hardly any question of continuity in film directing. The new trends in directing appeared either under the influence of analogous changes abroad, or under the powerful impact of general, social and psychological factors, common to all Europe, active in shaping the individual's outlook and his attitude to life.

*On the Little Island* in 1957 was 'the first swallow' in the eager search for a modern and at the same time nationally distinctive film style. Chronologically, *On the Little Island* could not have been directly inspired by similar films abroad, because it was too early for the French 'new wave', and the 'Polish school' was still working on one of its first masterpieces: *Ashes and Diamonds*, when Valeri Petrov's script was finished.

The relation between the Bulgarian cinema and Italian neo-realism is a more complicated matter. We can hardly discover any direct influence from the atmosphere and poetic spirit of the neo-realists, but there does exist a deep internal connection, consisting in the need for the REAL portrayal of the war. One can feel it in the very structure of the film *On the Little Is-*

land, where tenderness and severity blend in the building up of the details of characters and situations, where the obligatory linguistic characterization of the characters is so strongly marked and, most important of all — in the strict chronological order of the narrative. Beside his success with the actors and the construction of episodes, Vulchanov, perhaps for the first time in the Bulgarian cinema, hit on the dialectical link between sound and visual image. According to the script, the film begins in the present — a group of tourists goes on a boat trip to the St Anastasia Island. But this action is represented only through a sound counterpoint to the visual images. We hear the conversations, the sound of the boat's siren and the footsteps. When they land, for several moments the camera sees the island as the visitors do. Later it becomes detached and begins to follow the development of the actual plot.

The music of composer Simeon Pironkov is excellent. He also worked with Petrov and Vulchanov on their next films, experimenting a lot to get the required specific quality of film music. His score provides a running commentary to events happening on the screen. It consists of one or two phrases, varied so as to achieve dramatic value.

In the films which followed: *First Lesson* and *Sun and Shadow*, the music supplies metaphorical accents. This development again goes hand in hand with the evolution of the authors' film style.

In *On the Little Island*, Petrov and Vulchanov had not yet mastered the powerful medium of the film metaphor. They still sought their effects in the drama. In the scene of Costa Rica's



execution, Vulchanov makes use of an effect which claims to be a discovery not merely on Bulgarian but on an international scale — the slow fading of the frame until it becomes a facsimile with the idea of perpetuation. This sort of flash ideas are to be met with in Vulchanov's later work as well. But they became a part of an overall conception rather than the result of a spontaneous whim.

As time goes on, Petrov and Vulchanov go further in their attempt to forge a conception of poetic metaphoric cinema. This style is already observable in its embryonic stage in *On the Little Island*. The shooting of the seagull by Captain Stanev, or the floating corks which the Schoolboy ties around himself when he plunges into the water, become SIGN SYMBOLS, many more of which are to be seen later in *First Lesson* and *Sun and Shadow*.

*First Lesson* begins with just such a symbol — the puffy white cloud which symbolizes the love of Pesho and Violetta, and which appears every time the scenarist and director wish to emphasize the growing strength of their feeling. The scene with the lecturer's death, already described, is composed in the same symbolic manner. In *First Lesson* the sound track supplements the metaphorical images, lending them emotional colouring. For example, the chief musical motif always accompanies the white cloud, developing in the final scene into a symphonic étude expressing a storm of violent feelings. But the question of Vulchanov's final scenes will be treated separately.

A basic stylistic problem facing the makers of *First Lesson* was the finding of the genre. I believe that Valeri Petrov opted for tragi-comedy.

We are familiar with Valeri Petrov's approach to tragi-comedy from his poetry. Gentle dramatism and warmth, and kindly irony colour every line. No wonder that these found their way into his film writing. Here is a case in point. Violetta, bitten by a dog and submitting to a series of anti-tetanus injections, Pesho putting on a dark suit and tie to go to his girl-friend's birthday party, thus becoming a new person, neither the familiar Pesho nor a dressed up stranger — this is the kind of irony we associate with Valeri Petrov, emphasized by the seemingly accidentally tracking camera, American plan, of Dimo Kolarov.

In *First Lesson* Rangel Vulchanov solved for himself some problems of the composition of the individual frame. The content and character of a shot is determined by the details in it, by its visual value, by the precise selection of camera angle. We should emphasize that Binka Zhelyazkova in *We Were Young* achieved a great deal along this line. Her frame is flawlessly composed and cleared from some of the superfluous details which Vulchanov is passionately fond of. Montage within the frame reaches perfection here, and later examples of similar success came from Vulo Radev's *Tsar and General* and *The Peach Thief* and Borislav Sharaliev's *Knight without Armour*.

In this respect the most successful scene in the film *We Were Young* is Veska's death: a prison cell taken from the upper right-hand corner, a little lamp, suspended from the ceiling, swings slightly, now lighting up and now darkening the girl's face as she crouches in the corner facing the camera diagonally. Veska's face is stony and lifeless, only her hand mechanically reaches for the tiny packet of poison sewn into her collar

and carries it to her mouth. The frame lasts about one minute, the lamp swings rhythmically, while the camera pans barely noticeably around the walls on which the last words of many prisoners condemned to death have been scribbled.

When one sees Vulo Radev's films one feels a compelling need to draw a comparison. But the parallel is not neo-realism, nor the French poetic realism, nor Kalatozov's nor Reisman's style. Vulo Radev's style cannot be accounted for by resorting to other film-makers' expressive media, nor is it an eclectic mixture of elements of the styles enumerated. One should actually use a literary term: epos. The frame, the montage, the narrative of Vulo Radev are epic. The exposition is clearly outlined, further development invariably leads to conflict, climax and denouement. The characters are solidly constructed. Some of the episodes have a striking power of suggestion. For instance, the PT drill of the young conscripts conducted by the Colonel in *The Peach Thief*. The officer with an unbelievable zest and classic precision executes a series of compulsory attitudes thus laying bare to the audience his whole character: a desperate, unthinking faith in what has been taught to him: duty, courage, endurance, and a savage insistence on preserving his dignity as an officer of the royal army in a situation which daily prompts him to do the opposite. In a single scene Radev draws the whole character of the officer.

In *Knight Without Armour* Borislav Sharaliev attempts to combine the documentary character of the hidden camera with the poetry of Valeri Petrov. The film has no claim to be authentic *cinéma-vérité*, although it constantly tends in that direction.

Veska's death from  
*We Were Young*



It becomes clear that in their purely stylistic quests, Bulgarian film-makers follow the various styles of the modern world cinema, though elements of individual treatment and a sense of the national are always present. Which is a guarantee that Bulgaria has made her contribution to the rich variety of stylistic and genre trends of the modern world cinema.

Naturally, in the desire to make modern films at any cost, some pure imitations have been produced. Something extremely important is easy to forget: the style of an artist is formed in a fusion with the subject he treats. First of all, one speaks of the subject-matter of Antonioni, the philosophical programme of Bergman, and only then of the film style of Antonioni or Bergman. Godard tries to represent on the film script the psychology and thinking of his contemporaries, and therefore arrives at the method of collage of all sorts. But if a young Bulgarian director chooses a hero like Belmondo or Mastroiani, a lighting like Antonioni's or a final scene like Fellini's, not only is this no innovation in a particular cinematography, but it also speaks far from well of the artist himself.

In the stylistic development of the Bulgarian cinema, *Sun and Shadow* appears a unique case. It is the third film made by the team Petrov, Vulchanov, Kolarov. This film received considerable international recognition and most of the critics who reviewed it more or less correctly understood the intentions of the authors. I should like to quote an excerpt from the review of the Argentine newspaper *El Mundo*:

'Light and purity predominate in this film; there is a search, perhaps too insistent, on the part of the director Vulchanov and of the camera-



man, for the plastic moment in the harmony of the image, and it is sometimes brought to the point of virtuosity. The dialogue is permeated by the same sensitivity and the spontaneous love between the two young people gains the quality of a poem.'

In this case scriptwriter, director and cameraman joined their efforts to make a 'film in reverse' — not to develop a theme from concrete images, situations, plot and mise-en-scène, but through concrete images, situations and mise-en-scène to impose a previously chosen thesis. In that sense they want, on the one hand, to prove an entirely new function of the cinema — directly to illustrate a given abstract idea or ideas (let us recall that Eisenstein's dream was to film *Das Kapital*), and on the other, to carry to the extreme their exploration into the sphere of the object-symbol, the image-metaphor, the conventional language of the cinema. For, in order successfully to illustrate an a priori thesis, every image, every line and every frame should be symbols and materializations of notions, of a particular link of the author's idea as a whole. In that respect the authors demonstrate an extremely fruitful imagination: from the concrete symbol of life: a ticking wrist-watch; through the characters, personifying the two sides in the dispute; through the dialogues, key points in the development of the thesis; to the situations, enlarged metaphors like the dance under water, expressing everlasting beauty and love, or the vision of the country destroyed by atomic war. The climax is the conflict between these two episodes (it is no chance that they expressly follow each other), out of which the main thesis should crystallize directly. In their quests the authors





From the film *Sun and Shadow*

rely heavily on two things: maximum expressiveness and variability of camera position and the rich possibilities of sound. Again we have reason to admire the virtuosity of cameraman Dimo Kolarov and composer Simeon Pironkov.

The extraordinary complexity of the task has posed great difficulties before the authors and they have failed to cope with some of them. These are not of a technical but rather of a stylistic character. Having undertaken to expound a philosophy and draw a moral from it on the screen, they seem to have feared entirely to sacrifice plot, story, down-to-earth details, concrete motives for conversations and actions.

Occasionally, this impinges on the wholeness of their conception. An example of this, the most telling in my opinion, is the final scene — the improvised students' pageant which as a philosophical symbol is supposed to represent the richness of life's undying sources. But this sort of metaphor appears too elementary, especially in comparison with the two immediately preceding scenes — the underwater dance and the vision of atomic war, and nothing can justify

A scene from the vision of the atomic war in *Sun and Shadow*



its being placed at the end as a concluding episode.

A particular place in the stylistic waverings of Bulgarian film-makers belongs to Pavel Vezhinov's two latest scenarios: *Restless Home* and *A Taste of Almonds*. In them the writer, using two of his short stories, which as a whole carry a distinct atmosphere, and from a general philosophic point of view, reflecting a variety of contemporary phenomena, tries to create a type of film prose, in which inferences should not follow logically from the chronology of the facts analyzed, nor should they be directly represented through simpler or more involved metaphors. In his work the thesis has to be born through the parabolic comparison and clash, on the mental plane, of several plots. Further on the scriptwriter expects from the director a cinematic realization of this clash. Both films mentioned above only partially solve the task set by the scenario. In the first case, I think, because director Yakimov has not fully adopted the stylistic conception of the writer and follows the plot too faithfully, and in the second, the director has not entirely found his conception for the recreation of the script, accepting it as ready for the screen, without trying to clarify, enrich and give substance to its potential, occasionally unexplored possibilities.

In the next few years, probably because of the sharp increase of the number of films produced by the Bulgarian cinema, the problem of enlarging its sphere of genres and themes, and of evening out the professional level of film-makers was to be tackled. This seemed to limit the scope of experimenting in style and idiom; individual works did stand out but the mass urge for greater

originality was absent. Today it is clear that without the attainment of that generally high professional level of Bulgarian cinematography, it would be impossible to have a film like *The Sidetrack*, which received a gold medal and the FIPRESSI prize in Moscow in 1967, nor could we have had a series of young artists' first films which carry a great deal of enthusiasm, have in most cases experimental value, and give hope.

*The Sidetrack* appeared at a time when the tendency I would describe as 'sociological' dominated the world. Sociological problems on a national scale have become the concern of Godard and Resnais in France, of Rosi, Olmi and Bellocchio in Italy, the young Swedes, the young Czechs, and particularly of the Brazilian 'new wave'. In that sense *The Sidetrack* is not only a sociological film, a film about a generation which took an active part in our life immediately after the war, and today strikes a balance of its past performance and place in Bulgaria of 1967, whose economic, social, cultural and daily problems are entirely different from those of 20 years ago. The makers of *The Sidetrack*: the poetess Blaga Dimitrova, who wrote the script, and directors Grisha Ostrovski and Todor Stoyanov, have tried to encompass this complex of problems through a PSYCHOLOGICAL approach, through an analysis of the two leading characters Boyan and Neda, through the history of their relationship in the context of their environment. The authors have succeeded in finding an exceptionally appropriate, slow rhythm of narration, which is realized only through the image and cutting. Even the dialogues serve as a means of achieving the psychological characterization of the heroes. The poetic element is

achieved not through symbols but through the very treatment of the film narrative. The stepping into a sphere rarely touched by Bulgarian cinema — psychology — in *The Sidetrack* is a very heartening fact. The film style is an important contribution: it is characterized by well thought-out and thoroughly mastered means of expression which, while individually they do not claim originality of discovery, when taken together demonstrate something extremely precious for the Bulgarian cinematography — creative maturity.

## 2. *The Problem of the Creative Personality*

Only 16 years have elapsed since the showing of *Alarm*, which is officially considered the first production of the state-run Bulgarian cinematography. A period completely sufficient for a cinematography with traditions to find its new bearings. This, however, was not the case of the Bulgarian cinematography, which in 1948 started practically from scratch as regards pre-war history, established masters, or technical base. Those who had some earlier experience of film-making, naturally made their contribution and produced the first works of the young cinematography. Many of them were later replaced by young cadres, the graduates of the Moscow Institute of Film Art, the Czech Cinema Institute and the Lodz Film School. In this sense it is hardly justifiable to speak of any continuity, of any national creative school for the young. Still, one director, Zahari Zhandov, who directed *Alarm*, has to this day preserved his creative élan and

continues to make films, giving due consideration to the contemporary level of the Bulgarian as well as world cinema. After *Alarm*, a film which was discussed in detail in Chapter 1 of this book, Zhandov made *Septembrists*, the most important Bulgarian film prior to 1957. No doubt *Septembrists* was not free from the defects of artificiality and schematization that plagued other films of that period, yet in its claim for serious professionalism it became a milestone in the Bulgarian cinema. Zhandov has an infallible sense of cinematic form, for constructing a film narrative, for composition and balancing of individual episodes, for a purely film staging of large mass scenes. The battle scenes in *Septembrists*, considering the primitive equipment of the Bulgarian cinema in those days and the scanty knowledge in the field are indeed amazing. The main credit for these goes to the director, yet it would be wrong to overlook the scenario, which from the point of view of the main requirements of contemporary scriptwriting is the first professionally written Bulgarian scenario. The author was a 28-year-old Bulgarian youth, a graduate of the dramaturgy department of the Moscow Institute of Film Art, whose name has been closely associated with the Bulgarian cinema to this day. Scriptwriter Angel Wagenstein was the co-author of the scenario of *Alarm*, since the main scriptwriter, Orlin Vassilev, was the author of the play on which the film was based and the contribution of a professional film writer was necessary to adapt it for the screen. In this way Wagenstein linked his name with the Bulgarian cinema, and he has stayed with it. He is an extremely prolific writer, who is equally at home with subjects taken from the Second World



War (*Stars*) or Bulgarian contemporary life (*Adam's Rib*, *Two Under the Sky*, *The Law of the Sea*), the animated film (*The Snow Man*, *A Bunch of Stars*), the crime film (*The Chronicle of a Murder*). It would be natural to suppose, even without knowing Wagenstein's work, that his style has elements of universality and a thorough knowledge of the specific features of the scenario as a literary genre. It is true that Wagenstein's scenarios are somewhat literary in construction. He tries to delineate with maximum precision his characters and their backgrounds, the details of their life and psychology, and to probe into their mentality. He rarely puts in his scenarios any suggestions concerning film realization. And this is not because the writer makes no demands upon the director, but simply because he believes in the thorough, clear and exhaustive working out of the material, on which the director would rely in adapting it to the screen. Wagenstein's scenarios have such a solid philosophical and logical structure that on their basis, or so it seems to me, an ambitious director could create a remarkable problem film even for the sake of experimenting. But perhaps that is not true. Experience so far has revealed an interesting tendency. When these scenarios are taken up by a conscientious director, who treats the script with respect and tries to recreate it faithfully, it is precisely then that the talented, significant films are produced and the author in the final count turns out to be the scenarist himself. This is the case with *Stars*, *Adam's Rib* and to a great extent with *Two Under the Sky*. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Wagenstein has not found the right director who would be a co-author and would creatively interpret his

text. The only case when the director tried to experiment and to introduce his own conception in the realization is the film *The Chain*. It was probably not a real success because of young Sharlandjiev's inexperience, or perhaps the time has come for Wagenstein to make his own film, both writing and directing it. The whole fabric of his scenarios seems to contain a certain completeness, the finality of a well-rounded-off work. Wagenstein seems to try to incorporate in the scenario the philosophical framework and the plot together with its artistic recreation and transformation into film material. Precisely in this sense, if the scriptwriter is at the same time the director, he will be able to divide his creative energy between the literary version and its screen counterpart.

What characterizes the scriptwriter Wagenstein is his PSYCHOLOGICAL REALISM, attainable only through a competent and profound analysis of a reality and its people.

Valeri Petrov made his début in the Bulgarian cinema through *Point One*, a scenario which, as it proved later, ill accorded with his character as a poet. In his poetry Valeri Petrov is intimately lyrical, thoughtful and kind, never forgiving any anti-human, cruel or ugly thought or feeling. *Point One* was a publicistic scenario, but it proved that Valeri Petrov had a keen sense and a deep undying love of the cinema. Intimate lyrical feeling, man and his character viewed from close range, the great problems of the time reflected in everyday life, in a smile, a gesture, a lyric verse — this is the province of Valeri Petrov, who became one of the exponents of the POETIC in the Bulgarian cinema. In *On the Little Island* Valeri Petrov revealed but a part of all

this. Heroism, self-sacrifice, the individual and the collective — these were the main problems that interested the author. Naturally, they are treated with his own mellow and affectionate touch — the main characters are intimately close to us. For Valeri Petrov heroism is born under very definite circumstances: nobody fights an imaginary or ludicrously weak opponent. Petrov gave up the idea, so universal before, of the anonymous enemy. The enemy in his film, Captain Stanev, is comic and for that reason even more frightening. He is stupid and cruel, brutal and cunning. He must be fought not only with a rifle, but with the mind. Thus, for the sake of precise, detailed characterization, Valeri Petrov makes use of his tried poetic technique — the metaphor. Captain Stanev shoots down the seagull flying over his head. He also shoots down Costa Rica, because he is strong, has powerful hands and kind eyes, and a big heart, and such people have no place in the Captain's mean little world.

Work on this film brought Valeri Petrov and Rangel Vulchanov together. Petrov's symbolic and poetic vision of the world appealed to the young director, for whom the cinema, with its concreteness and imagery was the sole means of expression. Vulchanov managed to project on the screen the equivalent of the writer's idea, to visualize it in the most effective and telling manner. In fact, by collaborating with Valeri Petrov in making *On the Little Island*, Rangel Vulchanov came to his own as a director. The result was an extremely useful and effective collaboration, a creative harmony between director and scriptwriter. In *First Lesson* the two authors continued their creative work together. The poe-

tic text found a brilliant interpreter. Here something extremely interesting happened: Vulchanov became established as author in this film. While in the case of Valeri Petrov, *On the Little Island* was sufficient for us to recognize instantly the writer of *Tom Thumb*, *Juvenes Dum Sumus*, and the play *When Roses Dance*, Vulchanov barely outlined his style and his conception of the cinema in the same film. *First Lesson* is a brilliant display of directing skill, maturity and imagination. The film's final scene is a case in point. According to the script, the two characters part with a few meaningless words, with deep sadness and pain. Vulchanov found the film image of the pain. The words of Pesho and Violetta are gradually drowned by the music as it grows stronger. They do not speak but shout. The trembling lips and the tears we see are clearer than any text and the music expresses the tempestuous feelings. It is a deeply impressive scene! Its tragic power makes it one of the best (in my opinion the best) final scenes in Bulgarian films.

*Sun and Shadow* followed. It was an experiment to which their previous joint work brought Vulchanov and Petrov. In his scenario Valeri Petrov attained perfection in literary generalizations of a universal and epoch-making character. His characters and dialogues are symbols of mental processes, whose visual counterparts Rangel Vulchanov managed to find. He found the clear and accurate screen image of the poet's ideas. But the whole construction of the film material was already inherent in the scenario. Very little was left to Vulchanov. His scope of stylistic and visual invention was limited. What he tried to invent — the exuberant students' pageant in the final scene, struck a discordant

note in the film's general conception. The earthy and too concrete character of the boy, the fruit of Vulchanov's views, also existed on another plane, different from the intellectual aestheticism of Valeri Petrov. From that moment the creative paths of the two authors parted company. This is what Todor Andreykov wrote about it:

'I remember that the pretext of the parting was good: the long absence of Valeri Petrov from Bulgaria. Perhaps Vulchanov felt the necessity of looking for a different author's style. Perhaps he was already striving towards an entirely independent expression. Perhaps the intimate tone of Valeri Petrov, which originally agreed with him perfectly, underwent in the three scenarios an evolution which was not fully acceptable to Vulchanov: the intimate tone was becoming too finely delicate. The manly drive of heroes and events of *On the Little Island*, passed through the severity of *First Lesson*, extremely toned down to reach the lace-like fragility of *Sun and Shadow*. I remember that during the shooting of the last film, Vulchanov was very eager to have an elderly peasant on the beach of Slunchev Bryag wade into the Black Sea with his trouser-legs turned up. The desire to introduce this discordant touch was plaguing him insistently, and perhaps this supplements our idea of his preferences as man and artist. With *Sun and Shadow* the two seemed to exhaust the potentialities of their collaboration. Valeri Petrov would in no case have accepted the rough peasant with the turned-up trouser-legs, while Rangel Vulchanov would scarcely have liked the strange man with the roller skates who is careful not to damage the children's chalk drawings on the pavement.'

Valeri Petrov realized that idea of his with director Borislav Sharaliev, in *Knight Without Armour*.

I have already mentioned several times the name of Sharaliev, who is a curious phenomenon in the Bulgarian cinema. Ever since his début Sharaliev has worked with the most noted Bulgarian scriptwriters: with Hristo Ganev in *Song of Man* (1954), with Emilian Stanev in *On a Quiet Night* (1960), with Angel Wagenstein in *Two Under the Sky*, with Valeri Petrov in the TV film *Vaska* and in *Knight Without Armour*. And it is noteworthy that Sharaliev managed to find the right approach to the individual author's style of each of them, to feel and emphasize the distinctive quality of each. And at the same time all these films remain his own: they are restful, delicate, and smooth. Sharaliev's creative efforts are directed mainly to a maximum faithfulness to the writer, and at the same time towards refracting the peculiarities of every author through his own prism of earthiness, logic of actions and situations, AUTHENTICITY. His manner is descriptive, but never meditative or edifying. For example, in building up the conflict between Stefan and Tanya in *Two Under the Sky*, Sharaliev is careful all the time not to weigh the scales in favour of either, and to divide his sympathy equally between the good-natured, free and easy adventurer Stefan and the kindly, somewhat philistine Tanya. Each of the characters has the right to defend his own position.

In his scenario Angel Wagenstein sees the relationship between Stefan and Tanya as a conflict between two outlooks, two views of life: that of the frivolous though attractive adventurer and



the serious, somewhat narrow-minded girl. In the scenario both show development of character: the heavy miner's work and primitive living conditions bring out in Stefan his incipient brutality and ruffianism, while they teach Tanya tolerance and enlarge the circle of people and problems she has to face. As a result Stefan becomes the cause for the accident to his friend and for Tanya's running away. It is only after his profound regret that they come together once more. For Sharaliev the film's aim is, in a well-reasoned and logical manner, to bring two pure

From the film *Two Under the Sky*





From the film *Knight Without Armour*

and frank people to mutual understanding and happiness by overcoming their inherent and habitual faults. In this way he tactfully removes the scene of the accident, whose harshness does not appeal to him, and smooths out the edges of Stefan's character, bringing the two characters closer together.

79

In *Knight Without Armour*, on the other hand, he performed the opposite operation. The exalted poetry of the half-real man with the roller skates, who is careful not to touch the children's drawings on the pavement, is devoted to children, and plays little cunning tricks on the adults, was alien

to Sharaliev's style. So the fantastic man went behind the screen, from where we occasionally hear his voice; moreover, he is no longer fantastic but the voice of the scenario writer who merely comes close to the spectator to talk to him, to persuade him, if need be, of the authenticity of the happenings on the screen.

We see on the screen the clear eyes of a child in the jungle life of the adults. Seen through these clear eyes, every action of the grown-ups is laid bare, showing up its true value and significance.

It is not far-fetched to suppose that with these preferences, Sharaliev would have an affinity to the documentary method in feature filming. But it is not done with that unqualified enthusiasm characteristic of many film-makers who have lately plunged headlong into documentalism, catching characters and events 'in the act', breathlessly searching for life in its most spontaneous and unexpected manifestations. For Sharaliev documentary authenticity is clear and considered, it springs no surprises on the authors. Sharaliev's films are like a considerate interlocutor. They reveal to the spectator the vague contours of the reality around us and gradually introduce us into the world of their author's ideas, to amaze us finally with the truth and logic of his conclusions.

The film *The Peach Thief* appeared late in 1964. It was received with interest and satisfaction, but I believe nobody supposed that a new director was being born: Vulo Radev, who within such a short time was to become one of the leading figures in the Bulgarian cinema. From the standpoint of 1964 and as Vulo Radev's début, we evaluated the film in a way and by standards different from our standards today when we view



Nevena Kokanova and Radé Markovic in *The Peach Thief*

Mihail Mihailov as the Colonel in *The Peach Thief*



it in the presence of those features which were to become established as thematic and stylistic preferences of Vulo Radev.

Emilian Stanev's story *The Peach Thief* is a story of feelings. Feelings of love, security, insecurity, embarrassment, pity, sorrow, suffering, despair. The feelings of a woman, for in the story Liza is the object of the author's study. The war prisoner Ivo, who suddenly enters her life and changes it beyond recognition, is the child and recipient of this love. Vulo Radev, however, accepted and treated him differently in his film. Ivo not only becomes a leading character in his own right, but the centre of another world, unfamiliar to Liza, the world of the soldiers' camp and of the Turnovo streets at the height of the First World War. Liza's husband, the colonel of the royal army, becomes the other pole of the conflict, thanks to the several magnificent possibilities given him by the director (like the scene, already described, in which he performs a military exercise for the benefit of the recruits, or his talk about war with Liza) and to the brilliant performance of actor Mihail Mihailov. From monothematic, the story of the peach thief thus becomes polythematic.

Vulo Radev's whole effort concentrates on building up a continuous film narrative, smoothly flowing and well constructed, with its natural and skilfully prepared accents and climaxes, shorter or longer episodes. The characters of the intelligent, refined and cynical German officer, or the mute orderly with the obedient eyes, are constructed in the same solid manner, somewhat in the spirit of the great romantic and tragic prose of the 19th century. But the decisive quality that elevates *The Peach Thief* above the



level of the ordinary socio-erotic melodrama is the atmosphere, which the director conveys successfully and on which he actually relies. It is not only the national Bulgarian element, a sort of Bulgarian 'way of feeling' but also the climate of the age (it is no chance that some of the camp scenes are reminiscent of *The Grand Illusion*) and an attempt for a visual-philosophic synthesis in the sense of war versus the individual man and idea. The quickened pulse of humanity in time of war is measured by the power of tragic feelings, and the fire that burns people and life is put out. All this lends meaning and value to Vulo Radev's film. As for a certain academic traditionalism in the choice of means of expression, there were two alternatives: an insignificant plot (even though strongly emotional as in *The Peach Thief*) would have turned this style into a melodrama, or a significant theme would justify it and would be best expressed in precisely this style. Vulo Radev chose the second alternative.

*Tsar and General* was released in 1966. The scenario of Lyuben Stanev, though it treats a concrete historical period (Bulgaria during the Second World War) and dwells on a well-known fact of history (the failure of Bulgaria to participate as an ally of Hitler in the military campaign on the Eastern Front) really deals with a psychological problem. The writer exposes and analyses the conflict between King Boris and General Zaïmov against the background of the period. No doubt the ultimate end of the film is to extol the General — an unbending patriot and a far-sighted politician who can clearly visualize what active participation in the war on the side of Hitler would bring to Bulgaria. But the film's second dramatic centre proves no less effective:





Naoum Shopov (Tsar Boris III) and Peter Slabakov (General Zaïmov) in *Tsar and General*

the tragic fate of the king who deep down in his soul is aware of the obvious defeat of the Germans but whose duty to the crown and his own idea of patriotism compel him to act differently and desperately to stifle his feeling of love and respect for General Zaïmov.

Zaïmov is shot, but this is in fact a defeat of the king, who once more realizes the hopelessness of his country's situation and his own personal tragedy.

In this film Vulo Radev aims at authenticity, faithfulness to the period and the psychological wealth of the characters. This is just the right approach that makes of *Tsar and General* a very considerable film, and here the historical conflict provides the basis for elevating the tragedy to



A scene from *Tobacco*

Nevena Kokanova and  
Yordan Matev in *Tobacco*



one that has a message for all humanity, which in turn determines the contemporary validity of the film. As a historical film *Tsar and General* opened a new page in the Bulgarian cinema. The thorough approach to the facts and their examination on a psychological and aesthetic plane make the film something like a model for a historical and political film, and such models, especially at a high artistic level, remain among the most precious heritages of a national cinematography. Though through their very character these films tend to remain few, they play their role in cinema development.

Director Nikola Korabov had similar historic ambitions in view while making *Tobacco*, which was first shown in 1962. For several reasons, his work calls for a dialectical comparison with that of Vulo Radev. First, Vulo Radev was the chief cameraman of *Tobacco*, second, the comparison of *Tobacco* and *The Peach Thief* gave rise to many new aspects of the problem presented by the filming of works by outstanding Bulgarian prose writers, and third, *Tobacco* was in all respects (though principally as regards direction and photography) an experiment. HOW did Korabov and HOW did Radev each develop their experiment in their later films?

The scenario of *Tobacco* is based on Dimitar Dimov's novel of the same name. It represents one of the rare and what is more, successful attempts to offer a cross-section of an entire period in Bulgarian life — the years preceding the Second World War and the War itself. In this sense *Tobacco*, the novel, is a national epic: it examines the socio-economic situation of Bulgaria, the position and relationships of the classes formed, and throws light on various features of the nation-

al psychology. Korabov's film claims to be another such complex picture with many levels, gathering as in a focus all streams of the life of society. Korabov went in for psychological analysis, deciding to concentrate the internal dynamism of the literary material on that basis, sacrificing breadth of description to depth. In the process of work, however, he was overwhelmed by the abundance of literary material, and he developed more and more separate threads of the plot. Still he did not give up the more extensive treatment of certain scenes, key points in his opinion, a treatment modern as regards style and even experimental from the point of view of means of expression. In the final count, precisely these several scenes most conspicuously carry the stamp of the director's creative personality, and have absolute film value. They are also the most successful effort of the cameraman Vulo Radev. And while the vague traces of several lines along which the plot develops say enough to the Bulgarian spectator who has read the book, they were far from clear to the foreign viewer. When the film was shown abroad, the distributing firms made substantial cuts, merging the two parts into one. The result was a well-balanced film, adequate as regards composition and style, which however, is by no means a screen version of the novel *Tobacco* in the exact sense.

If Korabov's task was to adapt to the screen an epoch-making book, Radev in *The Peach Thief* took it upon himself to film a story. He enriched and developed it, adding various elements conveying the atmosphere of the period, social characteristics and the national features: in other words, adding all these things which Korabov in his films gave up for the sake of pure psychology and

experimenting. It is a pity that in their further works neither returned to the filming of a work of literature — we could then have witnessed the development of two radically opposing conceptions.

Korabov's next step was a film he wrote himself. *The Bull* (1965) was based on a real event. The anti-fascist Anton Popov, sentenced to death in 1943, received a marriage licence and the wedding ceremony was performed one hour before his execution. It is, potentially, highly dramatic. Korabov develops it sparingly, extremely laconically, in sharply contrasting tones. Every frame is remarkable for the painstaking search of expressiveness. The result was a film ballad, very beautiful and impressive. However, its extension into a full-length film by mechanically adding a first part: 'cinéma directe' representation of the wedding ritual in presentday Bulgaria, provoked numerous and heated discussions. The documentary representation in feature cinema, the active searching camera, film inquiry into things as they happen in life — all these are an indisputable achievement of the Bulgarian cinema, contributed by Korabov. But the rather arbitrary link between the two parts of the film makes one stop and think about the character and validity of film experiment as such. Can the formal and stylistic quests of an artist be considered an experiment if they are not sufficiently determined by the content itself, by the plot, or the message of the film? And if they impose themselves as a necessity from the very content and structure of the narrative, as in the second part of *The Bull*, or the earlier films of Rangel Vulchanov, can they be called an experiment at all? Let us hope that the further development of the Bulgarian cinema will provide an answer to this question.



## IV. THE PRESENT OUTLOOK

### *1. Débuts and Promises*

The youngest generation of Bulgarian filmmakers is entering a field in which a tradition has already been established. A cinema which has produced some 120 films, which already has its classics and has attained a definite professional and technical level, is faced with the problem of débuts on a plane very different from that of the early 'fifties, when the shortage of cadres was the decisive factor in this respect. The cinemamen who are making their débuts at present have an entirely different starting point from that of their older colleagues. Apart from their ambition to become the successors and continuers of the best that has been created in the cinema over the last twenty years, they have very definite vanguard ambitions. And this is not only in matters of style and form, where they are influenced if only occasionally, by the most recent advances of contemporary world cinema (young artists today have a much better opportunity to become familiar with its products than had their older colleagues at the outset of their careers), but in the sense of new themes, a new outlook, a new interpretation. In this train of thought I think it only natural that younger artists are markedly drawn to the contemporary theme. What accounts for this is not only the familiar youthful audacity (the problems of the present day in their constant development and qualitative changes are the most difficult to analyze and recreate artistically), but also the fact that this theme is vitally linked with the artists' own life and time. In it they find material for the artistic expression



o their own conception of life, of their own idea of contemporary cinema and their evaluation of themselves, their generation, and the society they live in. Another notable feature is the young artists' effort to create their own individual style. Naturally in this effort immaturity and vagueness of stylistic conception often take the upper hand over good intentions and then the theme, interesting in itself, is crippled, or even completely wasted. The danger in the treatment of the contemporary theme is that, when handled without sufficient sincerity or insufficiently coloured by the individual artist's personal vision, it tends to turn into a meaningless jumble of passages borrowed from the French 'new wave', or the Czechoslovak 'wonder'.

The most outstanding personality among younger film-makers is Lyubomir Sharlandjiev. He made his début in 1962 with *A Chronicle of Sentiments* and has since directed three more films: *The Chain* (1964), *Carom* (1966) and *A Taste of Almonds* (1967). Four films seem a sufficient number to judge an artist's directing technique, all the more so that it is not often one comes across such an ambitious début as Sharlandjiev made in *A Chronicle of Sentiments*. The scenario was written by a promising young author, Todor Monov, who through his characters — young workers on a construction site — tried not merely to portray the generation as represented in a group of individuals, but also to raise some burning problems of a civic and moral character. Sharlandjiev was attracted by the author's interesting approach to his subject, by Monov's experiments with the structure and nature of the narrative (freedom in development in time and space, retrospection, loose plot).



From the film *The Chain*

In directing the film he tried to work in harmony with the author's intentions. And the film does full justice to the scenario. It has the freshness and charm resulting from the director's courage in the selection of expressive media, and tries to establish a contact with the intensified sensitivity of contemporary audiences. It is obviously the work of an extraordinary artist.

The second film, *The Chain*, showed the director's preference for very different themes. No doubt the main reason lay in the remarkable scenario of Angel Wagenstein. In its whole conception it is a PUBLICISTIC work, a poem of the faith and perseverance of the man with a chain on his leg — a chain of people whom he meets and who, each in his own way, contribute to the salvation of the escaped prisoner, consciously or unconsciously impressed by the firmness with which he upholds his idea. The scenario, which provided expertly written literary material and contained the clues for the cinematic realization itself, was no doubt an excellent opportunity for the free and successful expression of an artist with a penchant for publicistics in the cinema. Perhaps *A Chronicle of Sentiments* was a hint of just such an inclination in Sharlandjiev? *The Chain* is impressive with its severity of style, well-finished imagery and visual power. It was followed by *Carom*, which I think throws some light on the reasons for the success of *The Chain* (apart from the scenario).

*Carom* is a psychological film with a markedly intimate dramatic character. Conflicts are revealed mainly in intimate relationships, and the nuances in the relations between characters hint at the problems of each human being, hence the problems of the entire contemporary society.

In this sense *Carom* had in it the makings of the great, socially committed contemporary cinema. Yet the film has its limitations both in scale and significance. It is characterized by three important points: 1) it is clear that psychological films are not Sharlandjiev's element; 2) he is a master in the observation of details of all kinds (hence the apparent authenticity of every shot, gesture or word in his films) and knows how to select his actors, and 3) the film is a very fine achievement in terms of camerawork. The cameraman is Emil Wagenstein. At this point it might be useful to return for a moment to *The Chain*, also photographed by Emil Wagenstein. Purity of the visual image, the architectonics of the shot, the monumental quality and the precise balancing of surfaces and black with white were the principal qualities of *The Chain*. *Carom* possesses the same qualities, though the atmosphere and emotional undertones are different. In a word, Sharlandjiev's two films, lying poles apart in genre and subject, prove the brilliant qualities of Emil Wagenstein's camerawork.

Such happenings are not isolated phenomena in the Bulgarian cinema of today. Wagenstein, Todor Stoyanov (*Two Under the Sky*, *The Sidetrack*), Atanas Tassev (*Knight Without Armour*, *A Taste of Almonds*), demonstrate a remarkable feeling for film imagery on a high contemporary level. At the same time, the work of each shows not only a definite personal manner, but also a precise selection of the means of expression in harmony with the genre and style of a particular film. Each film has its own definite character of camerawork. And this can by no means be explained by the supposition that, perhaps, cameramen have finally learned how to photograph.

The case of Georgi Georgiev can be cited. He has a number of films to his credit, yet in his last film (*The Man in the Shade*) he worked in an entirely new style, and this is a proof of the primitivism of such an assumption. This phenomenon is associated, in my opinion, with the very marked ambitions of the young scenarists and directors, mentioned above, to produce films that were unmistakably their own at all costs. And though the final result not always goes full justice to these ambitions, they do in most cases profoundly affect the work of the rest of the participants in the creation of the film: composers, art designers, directors of montage, and primarily cameramen. It is a revealing fact that at the annual Varna National Film Festival in 1967, the film critics' prize was equally divided between two cameramen: Todor Stoyanov and Atanas Tassev, for their respective films: *The Sidetrack* and *A Taste of Almonds*. The latter, scripted by Pavel Vezhinov, is Sharlandjiev's latest film. It is another psychological film, with a very creditable performance by the actors, and a fine observation of detail. Yet it gives the impression of fragmentariness, isolation of events and of the facts depicted, and half-drawn conclusions. Here Sharlandjiev has tried for a freely constructed dramatic story and looseness of plot — features which are absent in *Carom* and *The Chain*, but which had been tried in *A Chronicle of Sentiments*.

Another director whose first film (*Men*, 1966) gives cause to fear a similar development is Vassil Mirchev. And the reason is that phenomenon which I formulated as a lack of a 'co-existence' between a conception of content and means of expression. Mirchev combines several widely

varying views of form: from the solid earthy realism of Vulo Radev, to the ornateness of the shot of Rangel Vulchanov, to the spontaneous authenticity of the documentary cinéma-vérité, to the dynamic, breathless fragmentariness of Jean-Luc Godard. And all these features are embodied in the screen version of the novel by Georgi Markov, characterized by its journalistic and speculative style. The theme of the confrontation of three types of contemporary youth — the

From *Men*





comparison of the moral and ethical views of the independent-minded intellectual, the hard-working careerist and the good-natured and easy-going Bohemian — acquired in Mirchev's treatment a somewhat nervous, pathetic ring, which sounds unnatural. But, on the other hand, Mirchev shows admirable artistic freedom and competence in operating with all four formal methods he has selected. Because of that, it would be impossible to make even the most vague guess at the direction his further development might take, not even as to whether he will stick to the contemporary theme and the problems of his generation, in which he showed such a sharpened interest in *Men*.

Another young director, Vladislav Ikononov, demonstrates a much calmer, more far-reaching and philosophical approach in his treatment of contemporary subjects. He seems to try to encompass things in a vertical cross-section, rather than on a horizontal plane. In this he has to overcome an additional difficulty in comparison with Mirchev and Sharlandjiev. The method of observation on the horizontal plane, the catching of certain events, phenomena and types of contemporary society and their prompt recreation always contains an element of RELIANCE ON MATERIAL. I have in mind the fact that any kind of organization, be it ever so arbitrary, of film shots, especially when topical in content, has its logic, on which the artist often depends. Ikononov's dialectical and philosophic approach makes it incumbent upon him to have a preconceived viewpoint concerning the meaning, which is especially difficult for a beginner, particularly when he sets about handling the problems of a generation other than his own. The interesting

thing is that Ikonomov succeeds in coping with difficulties of this sort. Through touching delicately on the most sensitive areas of human memory, such as conscience and half-forgotten emotions, he builds up a peculiar type of film fabric. And while his first film (*The Summoned Did Not Appear*, 1966) shows a certain vagueness in his structural and visual conceptions, the second (*The Silent Paths*, 1967) seems to me typical of Ikonomov's path to the new cinema.

. . . . The two main characters dwell on past glories in order to test themselves in a confrontation of past and present, to discover the scope and strength of their long friendship, and with this the pulse of the time they are living in, the meaning of the past twenty years. They start from the real world of multi-storey buildings and asphalted highways and go gradually deeper into the wilderness of the mountain's forests, and the metaphorical element grows in range and body — it is on that metaphor that the scenarist Lyubomir Levchev and the film director base the artistic fabric of their philosophical meditation.

What binds the two friends together is their shared past of war and guerrilla struggle, the death of the comrade whom they buried somewhere in the mountain. Today they are on their way back to the same spots to re-assess the past years, when the conscience and honour of both have been put to the test a hundred times.

97

The authors base their film on the synthesis of fact and idea, present and past in retrospection, reality and vision. To enhance this, the authors have tried to rid their settings of overly concrete, down-to-earth details, relying on the general effect of their theme. The result, however, is

that the film is dominated by a dry, sometimes irritating rationalism, which makes of it a treatise, a moral admonition, the mere illustration of a thesis.

When the most recent works of a particular cinematography and especially its younger artists are discussed, there is a danger that the text inevitably becomes a sum of individual judgments of film happenings treated in isolation, of separate portraits and sketches. One inevitably fears to make classifications without a stable basis or to commit oneself too much by constructing involved hypotheses on sand foundations. For the only thing that is common to the youngest artists in the Bulgarian cinema, apart from their ambition to manifest individuality in their creative conceptions, is their preoccupation with the contemporary theme in a variety of aspects. Going into some of these aspects seems to me the most correct approach to an understanding of the mosaic of views and styles.

Once more, after a long interruption following the death of Dako Dakovski, the theme of the Bulgarian village has found its interpreter. The first work of Peter Donev was his scenario for *Poor Man's Street*, characterized by the literary scope of the narrative and the detailed description and motivation of the period, background, setting, events, characters and actions. Donev's scenarios have an extremely calm tone, they flow slowly and surely, especially when they have already been made into films, by a conscientious director faithful to the scenario, like Hristo Piskov, for instance, or Donev himself. *Eternal Calendar* was his début in directing. What is encouraging and at the same time intriguing, is Donev's obvious reluctance to create



A frame from the film *The Silent Path*  
From *Eternal Calendar*



a rich and exhaustive picture of the contemporary Bulgarian village with a number of characters, beautiful landscapes, and an array of genre details. The author is interested in a moral conflict: what is and what is not a crime. He confronts the honest and highly emotional cowherd with the intelligent but too peremptory and dogmatic village official, for whom time stopped when he took to the mountains to fight the fascists. His calendar is still open on the same page. He forgets that the decrepit little village houses surrounded by crooked hedges and sunk in mud have given place today to a modern settlement, with electricity, fine roads, coffee-shops and picture houses. Analogous changes, though much deeper and more serious, have occurred in the people's mentality and consciousness. The village youth not only has its own opinion on a number of social and economic problems, but is in sharp conflict with the older generation, although at the decisive moment it will know how to defend and support them. This and several other theses and anti-theses sound a little odd and too intuitive for us to agree with, yet Peter Donev, in his effort to see life realistically, has managed to grasp the country's social development with its complex dialectical relationships with great precision. He seeks to reflect it mainly through people's psychology, through the changes in their notions of morality and dignity. And it is noteworthy that the tendency, so characteristic and understandable in his young colleagues, to proceed from a preconceived thesis, is suppressed by an interest in the objective study of facts. The themes concerned with their generation and present-day life are actually contemporary subjects for young film-makers. It is thus natural to



assume that in their films the character of contemporary man should be well-rounded and true to life.

## *2. The Man of Our Own Day in Recent Bulgarian Cinema*

The cinema hero, the film character. . . the unforgettable Citizen Kane, Ringo Kid, Maxim, Chapayev, Lady Hamilton, Garance and a host of others, through whom films are etched indelibly onto people's memory. These are ideal characters, embodiments of dreams and rousers of admiration. . . Their likes seem to appear more and more seldom in contemporary films. The screens are increasingly peopled by substanceless shadows, lacking their own biography and their development in life — we most frequently define them as prototypes of the author, prototypes of a generation, exponents of somebody's outlook, materializations of a thesis. Less and less often do we speak of true stars like those in the past who, though they went happily from one film into another practically without changing, made their own physical and psychological qualities so intimate a part of the characters they created, that the result was a solid, full-blooded film hero, half-invention, half-reality, which nevertheless lived in the mind of the audience as real. Jean Gabin and Maréchal in *The Grand Illusion*, Jean in *Port of Shadows*, Pépé in *Pépé Le Moko* — one did not know where the film character ended and the real man began. Why do we today no longer have Jean Gabins, but



just 'a young Frenchman who has survived the war in Algiers', 'an over-sophisticated highbrow', 'a depraved daughter of divorced parents', or at best Antonioni's Monica Vitti, Godard's Anna Garina, Visconti's Alain Delon? Perhaps the increased mastery of expressive media, the growing potentialities of the camera in image moulding have impersonalized the hero and gradually minimized the role of the actor? One asks oneself whether the new type of cinema, the 'thinking cinema', as distinct from the 'emotional cinema' of the past, must needs lead to such a result. We should try to analyze this tremendously important problem of contemporary world cinema in the narrow context of the Bulgarian national cinema. From *Kalin The Eagle* and Dako Dakovski's Vitan Lazarov, Mito and Kroumcho, Rangel Vulchanov's Costa Rica, Zheko, Pesho and Violetta, Dimo and Veska in *We Were Young* down to the present day, the character of the hero is closely linked with the development of our cinema. This is even more true of the screen versions of literary works like *Tobacco* or *The Peach Thief*. I should like to list, in a chronological order, some of the more memorable characters of Bulgarian films: Nikola Vaptsarov in *Song of Man*, the driver Misho in *It Happened in the Street*, Zülker in *Adam's Rib*, Ruth and Walter in *Stars*, Irina and Boris in *Tobacco*, Lipovski in *The Gold Tooth*, the Inspector in *The Inspector and the Night*, the Colonel in *The Peach Thief*, Anna Chakurova in *The She-Wolf*, Tsar Boris and General Zaïmov in *Tsar and General*. Vanyo Stamov and the Uncle in *Knight Without Armour*, Neda and Boyan in *The Sidetrack*.

The character and main features of individual heroes were touched upon more than once in the

discussion of the respective films. Most often they are exponents of the authors' conception, of their attitude towards their subject, carriers of the theme itself. Lately the leading characters have taken on another, more complicated function. The increasingly great effort on the part of authors to find a new and original film form and style, their gradual abandoning of descriptiveness in favour of the presentation of a solid thesis and a clue to it, make of the characters the main prisms refracting various aspects of the author's idea. Human psychology becomes the material out of which the author shapes the dramatic embodiment of his idea. Typical of this approach to characterization seem Boyan and Neda (*The Sidetrack*) whose characters in their completeness contain the authors' assessment of the last twenty years of the nation's development.

The problem of character drawing in a particular cinematography is inseparable from another, that of its actors. I think it proper to mention first that the Bulgarian cinematography does not have its own actors. They all come from the theatre and bring with them all the habits of stage acting that are a hindrance in most cases. On the other hand, the numerous film performances of most actors in no way interfere with their theatrical careers. A typical case is Apostol Karamitev, who has been active in both cinema and theatre for 15 years, acting major parts in both.

103

Apostol Karamitev is a highly versatile actor. He is equally successful in tragedy, drama and comedy. *Our Land*, *Under the Yoke*, *It Happened in the Street*, *Two Under the Sky*, *Favourite No 13*, *Master of All Trades*, *Knight Without Armour* are only some of the films in which he has played

major parts. Karamitev feels equally at home in films directed by men of widely varying views and methods, the emotional element in him is inseparable from the intellectual. He plays his parts with understanding and fine judgement. Karamitev is a born actor, who invariably hits upon the most characteristic and expressive touch in creating every part, knowing no false notes, no failures. These qualities will probably secure a future for him in the Bulgarian cinema.

The fame and popularity of the 'Star No 1' in Bulgarian cinema — Nevena Kokanova, came rather unexpectedly. The attractive young actress started in roles where she acted girls of her age. Those were minor and not particularly expressive parts. She had varying degrees of success in *Too Late for Love?*, *On a Quiet Evening* and *Be Happy, Annie*, yet what was obvious in all three was that she was photogenic and had a fine screen appearance.

The part of Irina in *Tobacco* proved a turning point in Kokanova's career. Irina in Dimitar Dimov's novel is one of the best drawn characters in contemporary Bulgarian literature, so Kokanova had a wealth of literary material at her disposal. Though her Irina was a failure when compared with the original character, it was a great success in comparison with our idea of Kokanova's acting talent. Her next part — Liza in *The Peach Thief* — greatly enriched her palette, while her further roles of contemporary characters: Zhana in *The Inspector and the Night*, Anna in *Carom* and Gerda in *A Taste of Almonds*, added more facets to her creative personality.

Kokanova's greatest achievement, however, came in *The Sidetrack*. Neda is a rich and full-blooded character: perhaps it was the result



Nevena Kokanova (Neda) and Ivan Andonov  
(Boyan) in *The Sidetrack*

Nevena Kokanova in *The Sidetrack*



of the actress's accumulated experience, perhaps of the skill of Grisha Ostrovski, a leading theatre director who made his cinema début with *The Sidetrack*, in working with the actors, or perhaps there was another reason, as the critic Hristo Kirkov suggests:

'One of the reasons for this success is in the script itself. In it writer Blaga Dimitrova has created a character whose most important feature is spontaneity. In life and human relationships, Neda acts impulsively, on the spur of her innermost feelings. This falls within the scope of Nevena Kokanova's talent; her main characteristic is, in my opinion, that same directness and spontaneity. The actress feels her part, it appeals to her, she has no problem in understanding it and for that reason plays it with ease, precision and compelling power. Especially in those moments when Neda is swayed by the original elemental force of her love for Boyan?

Another talented actor who has become indispensable to the Bulgarian cinema is Georgi Kaloyanchev. His gift for comedy became apparent in *First Lesson* (Vaska), *Master of All Trades* (Spiro), *The Gold Tooth* (Miliya). But the climax of his achievement was the part of the Inspector in *The Inspector and the Night*, where his sensitivity, gentle humour and sincerity gave life and warmth to Bogomil Rainov's too sophisticated hero. The success of Kaloyanchev to a great extent determined the high level of the film as a whole. He repeated it in the role of Kondov, the director, in *The She-Wolf*.

Georgi Georgiev is one of the most prominent personalities in the Bulgarian cinema. His virile and solid presence on the screen lends weight and significance to every scene. His characters make



memorable the films in which he has participated: *The Law of the Sea*, *First Lesson*, *We Were Young*, *Between His Parents*, *A Taste of Almonds*. Georgiev's most outstanding performance was in *The Gold Tooth*. The forceful and tragic character of the traitor by compulsion demonstrated the actor's wide range of talent.

Other interesting Bulgarian film actors are Ivan Andonov (the Schoolboy in *On the Little Island*, the Engineer in *Investigation*, Boyan in *The Sidetrack*), and Naoum Shopov (the French officer in *The Peach Thief*, Tsar Boris in *Tsar and General*). They are highly intelligent actors whose invention supplements the work of the scenarist and director.

I should also like to mention several actors whose isolated successes in films were not repeated because of their youth or the peculiarity of their gifts. Sasha Krousharska created the finest woman character in the Bulgarian cinema in *Stars*. She is unsurpassed for emotional wealth and for her skill in revealing the deepest meaning of the part. As Veska in *We Were Young*, Roumyana Karabelova created a remarkable character on the basis of rather poor and one-sided dramatic material. Ilka Zafirova in *The She-Wolf* portrayed an extremely colourful character with a conflicting inner life, and showed brilliant promise.

But the achievement of the actors is in direct relation to the director's ability to adapt his conception to the actor's particular talents. In this respect one should by all means note the work of director Rangel Vulchanov, in whose films a number of actors acted their finest roles: Ivan Kondov, Naicho Petrov, Konstantin Kotsev and Stefan Peichev in *On the Little Island*, Cornelia Bozhanova and Georgi Naoumov in

Ilka Zafirova in *The She-Wolf*



*First Lesson*, Anna Prucnal in *Sun and Shadow*, Georgi Kaloyanchev in *The Inspector and the Night*, Ilka Zafirova in *The She-Wolf*. Vulchanov knows how to evaluate and use an actor's potentialities to the best advantage. In this sense some actors, like Kaloyanchev as the Inspector and Zafirova as the She-Wolf, can be said to be Vulchanov's discoveries.

Lyubomir Sharlandjiev has also shown a fine feeling for the actors' gifts. But in his work the success of the suitably selected cast is often marred by a vagueness of his conception of the film as a whole — as regards both plot and form.

#### V. NOTES ON THE PROBLEMS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE BULGARIAN SHORT FILM

A national cinematography is characterized not only by its feature film production, but also by its short films, most often classed as documentaries, popular-science films and animated films. The purpose of the present volume is not to study the reasons why these films are less popular with the public, or with the critics. Such a study should be made by theoreticians and sociologists. My task is to discuss the problems and development of the contemporary feature cinema, and this last chapter will, therefore, only give a general picture of Bulgarian short films, a survey supplying a certain amount of information, rather than a detailed analysis of the problem. A detailed analysis of this kind of cinema is called for, especially because it has often been unfairly neglected and has been getting less

than the necessary attention, in comparison with feature films. We are aware of the seriousness of this task which will be tackled in one of our future publications.

The Bulgarian short film represents a significant part of the country's cinema production. Its different genres have appeared at different times, the development of each had certain specific features, but as regards the stages of its overall development, the direction of creative efforts and artistic maturity, that development went parallel and occasionally even coincided with that of feature films. Documentary and popular-science films, for instance, flourished during the late 'fifties, and during the next few years the artists were busy seeking the formula of their genre, establishing the features of a solid style in keeping with the level of world cinema. The animated film appeared only in the late 'fifties, at a time when feature films and other types of shorts were making very definite progress, so it was natural for the development of this genre to be smoother and more even, without any major hitches. Within a short time it won considerable success abroad and recognition in Bulgaria, thus making us stop and think whether the reason was in the specific quality of the genre or in certain features of the organization of the production of such films.

Bulgarian animated films are made by a specialized department for animated films forming part of the Feature Film Studio. It is staffed by a group of directors, animators and editors, some of whom often write the scripts. There are no staff script-writers, and the department secures the collaboration of leading authors, literary men and scenarists of the Feature Film Studio. The cut-

put is about ten films a year, and they are directed by Hristo Topouzanov, Radka Buchvarova, Zdenka Doicheva, Stoyan Doukov, Donyo Donev, and Ivan Andonov. They are all pupils of the pioneer of the Bulgarian animated film, the world-known director Todor Dinov. His films have won prizes at a number of international festivals, he is the founder of the genre in Bulgaria, and his work, his style and conceptions seem to me to be indicative of the basic features of the Bulgarian animated film.

Our artists began to make cartoons for films at a time when there was already a tradition of long standing in this field in many countries. They learned from the work of the great American cartoonist Steinberg, and the Danish master Bidstrup, as well as from the achievements of the contemporary Polish and Czech cartoonists. During the 'fifties, however, the typical cartoon drawing that appeared in the Bulgarian press was invariably associated with the names of four artists of stature who worked in a similar style: Alexander Zhendov, Iliya Beshkov, Stoyan Venev and Boris Angeloushev. The two-dimensional cartoon of Alexander Bozhinov found no followers, while the two-dimensional cartoon of the promising young artist Boris Dimovski was too free for the purposes of animation which required more severe geometric forms.

Thus the animators had to make their own drawings. This, I think, is Todor Dinov's forte. His drawing is simple, clear and supple — it lends itself very easily to deformation. In his major films (listed chronologically); *Tale of the Pine Twig* (1960), *Sivoushka* (1962), *Lightning Rod*, *Prometheus*, *Jealousy*, *The Apple*, *The Daisy* (1965), and *Driven Out of Paradise* (1967)



the character drawings are different, they are either people or objects, are often static, but are always the symbols of a very clear and simple idea. In these films the situation is everything. The dramaturgy is simple and terse and is based on movement and rhythm (Dinov often composes his own scenarios). The inexhaustible force of his imagination brings something new and interesting to each of his films.

Hristo Topouzanov, who has also won prizes at many festivals, stands out among Dinov's pupils. His versatility is indeed amazing. His plots range from the gloomy grotesque (*Parade*, 1960, *Masquerade*, 1965) through the children's tale (*The Scissors and the Little Boy*, 1965, *The Scissors and the Little Girl*, 1965), to the colourful parody of *Revenge* (1966), and the humour of *The Cow Which...* (1967). Topouzanov often writes his own scenarios, his experiments with the material for animation have a very wide-range: from the ordinary animated drawing to the moving colour spots, from puppets to reals scissors and coloured glossy paper, pieces of cloth of various colours and thread. It is just this versatility that makes Topouzanov an original creative personality in Bulgarian animated film. The rest of the artists differ in both method and achievement: Donyo Donev (*Tale*, *The Second Bottle*, *Spring*, *Esperanza*) regards the fairytale plot as a source of possibilities in seeking a brilliant and expressive form; Radka Buchvarova (*The Snow Man*, 1960, *What Shall I Be?* 1966, *Complacency*, 1964, *The Ballons*, 1967) has specialized in a highly necessary type of animated films, often avoided by artists too much dominated by ambition: the animated film for children. Ivan Andonov is seeking the formula of the purely

philosophical cartoon film and his less successful films (*Shooting Ground*, 1965, *Birds*, 1967) are perhaps due to insufficient clarity of conception.

The team of artists working in the animated film, their experiments and successes make the genre a great hope in the Bulgarian cinema.

The state of contemporary Bulgarian documentary cinema appears far more complicated.

The first films ever made in Bulgaria were documentary films and more particularly newsreels. Since it has not been established with absolute precision which was the first documentary film, 1910 is officially adopted as the birth date of the Bulgarian film. Some half dozen short films were produced during that year, virtually laying the foundation of a regular national film production. Unlike the production of feature films which began at approximately the same time but developed chaotically due to more or less chance factors, the production of newsreels was prompted by the need to record and popularize important events. They thus served the needs of the authorities, who financed their production. Last but not least they were necessary to supplement the programme of the cinemas which included mainly foreign feature films. The purchasing of foreign shorts was not the practice adopted, and evidently it would not have been expedient, since they also dealt with events of importance to the particular country where they were made and their showing in another country would have been pointless in most cases.

It is clear, therefore, that the beginnings of the Bulgarian documentary film were not associated with the end of the Second World War and yet that period witnessed a rapid progress in the newsreel, owing to the radical political

and social changes which set in. Documentaries shot at the time include the film records of the coming down of the partisans from the Kocho Chestimenski detachment and their Commander Alexander Ivanov-Chapay, to Belovo (cameramen Parlapanov and Vulchev); of the welcome given to the partisans from the Georgi Benkovski detachment by the population of Panagyurishtë and Strelcha (cameramen Yuritsin and Petrov); of the return of the Fourth Sofia Partisan Brigade to Sofia (cameramen Holiolchev, Hristov and Petrov); and the chronicles of Grezhov, Kissyov, Bakurdjiev and several Soviet army cameramen on the days immediately following September 9, 1944, the date of the socialist revolution. Among the many documentaries produced a year later, the first documentary film of medium length, entitled *Bulgaria*, made by a joint Soviet and Bulgarian team, stood out. The narrator's text was written by Ehrenburg. The films made by Zahari Zhandov in the next two years are of particular interest. Among them are *People Amid the Clouds*, which won a prize at the international festival in Venice, and *A Veiled World*, telling of the Bulgarian Moham-medans in the Rhodope region. These films demonstrate the professional qualities of Zhandov, who at that time also directed the major Bulgarian feature films.

The most general trends characterizing Bulgarian documentary cinema should be sought in the recreation of the most topical events and problems of the day. Because of the large number of documentary films, it might be well to class them on the basis of subject-matter. In the first place we could point out the *reportages* on construction and changes in the various fields of life in

post-war Bulgaria. Together with them appeared the *historical-documentary* films, such as *Hristo Botev* by Yuri Arnaoudov, *Hristo Smyrnenski* by Yanoush Vazov, *Vassil Kolarov*, by Nyuma Belogorski. Of the *film poems*, the more important are *The Tents Are Burning* by Alourkov, *Lights and People* by Hristo Kovachev, *Spring Ballad* by Haritonov, *Rails into the Sky* by Edward Zahariev, and among film *biographies* *Master of the Stage* about the actor Konstantin Kissimov, *Actor and Citizen* about the actor Peter Dimitrov, *The Artist Zlatyu Boyadjiev*, and *The Road of the Pleiades* about the graphic artist and sculptor Vassil Ivanov.

All those films were made at different times, some before and some after 1960. But the last several years have been characterized by a painstaking search for maximum expressiveness in the documentary film. These efforts have been dictated not only by the development of the genre itself, but by the desire of the makers of these films to get across to the viewer and evoke an intellectual and emotional response. The experiments of young documentary film makers in the field of cine-reporting have proved particularly interesting.

The *film-travelogues* hold a special place among documentary films. *Under the Sky of Guinea* by Tenyu Kazaka, Roussev and Sharlandjiev, *Lotuses in Bloom* by Dimko Zahariev, *Along the Roads of Africa* by Nyuma Belogorski, and *A Holiday of Hope* by Hristo Ganev and Hristo Kovachev, made in 1963, are all worth seeing. The latter records, in a four-part story, the first four days (July 1 to 4, 1962) of the national independence of Algiers and is really a most talented work. This is most effective film journalism on a

high professional level, since the facts recorded are shown in all their profound significance coloured by the positive stand of the authors.

The Bulgarian documentary cinema has not only produced some very creditable works, it can also boast a series of distinguished directors who have devoted their talents to the genre and won reputation as masters. These include Nyuma Belogorski (his latest film is about the Reichstag Fire Trial in 1933), Roumen Grigorov, Yuri Arnaoudov and once again Zahari Zhandov, who in 1964 made *Roused after Centuries* — an exceedingly interesting study of the Thracian cultural heritage. But the young generation of documentary film makers, like Yuli Stoyanov (*Days and People, Friends' Meeting*), Nevena Tosheva (*Am I That Bad? The Little Artist*), Georgi Stoyanov (*Zhiko Marinov, Slumber*), Edward Zahariev (*Rails into the Sky, Salt*) have embarked on a road of their own. Devoting a great deal of attention to subject and content, they are also trying to find a highly laconic and expressive form. Their efforts in this direction will no doubt mark a new stage in documentary films, which it seems too early to judge. For in the documentary film, unlike the animated film, where one has, as Valeri Petrov put it, 'not to photograph in a new way, but to think in a new way,' the film record authentically recreates a reality familiar to the spectator, and whether this reality will move and captivate will depend to a great extent on the form and the manner of realization. The problem of form, therefore, of the professional level, of the author's imagination is of the utmost importance in the documentary cinema.

In my opinion, the situation is very similar to that of the *popular-science* genre. We could look



for the rudiments of the genre in some documentary films made prior to 1944, for the element of communication of scientific knowledge exists in principle in all documentary films on geographical subjects. But the regular production and popularization of the genre became possible only after the Bulgarian cinematography was taken over by the state, for the private persons who managed it before that could scarcely be interested in the production of films which, due to their very nature, find a certain difficulty in establishing contact with the wider public. The studio for popular-science films became an independent department of the cinematography in 1950. Since then it has had a regular annual production. The first more important film was *How to Fight Rabies* (1945). The film was of great topical value, for at the time rabies was a particularly widespread disease due to the poor living conditions in the Bulgarian village. But it also contained some features that were to become established later as the main characteristic of Bulgarian science films: its propaganda value. Among the more interesting films produced by the studio during the next few years were *In the Waters of the Sreburna* and *Stone Forest* (1949), director Konstantin Kostov, *The Cigarette Goes a Long Way* by Boncho Karastoyanov, *Our Caves* and *The Architecture of Kopivshtitsa* by Stefan Topaldjikov, and *Hristo Botev* and *Nikolai Pavlovich* by Yuri Arnaoudov. In 1958 the studio already had a staff of about thirty directors and cameramen and 674 films to its credit. Films on agricultural, cultural, historical folklore, industrial, medical and other scientific subjects were being made. The best achievements are the films made by Lyubomir Obrete-

nov, which won a number of international distinctions, and of Konstantin Obreshkov. The former has tried his hand at a strictly scientific treatment of the problems while the latter has concentrated on popularizing some branches of science of daily importance. Films about art are made by Yuri Arnaoudov and two younger directors: Yanoush Vazov (*Woodcarving through the Centuries, The Relics of Rozhen*), and Lada Boyadjieva (*The Folk Song and Dance Ensemble, Return of the Icons*).

The studio for popular science films makes many of its films on orders placed by various institutes and public organizations. These films often have lower artistic qualities either because of the limitations imposed by the 'customer's' choice of the manner of developing the plot, or because the authors, who try to make up for the dryness of content by extravagance of form, go too far in experimenting and beyond the domain of the genre.

Recently, great attention has been devoted to two new types of popular-science films: the educational film and the sociological poll film. The interest shown in these genres by some young directors who are making their débuts in cinema has been an important factor. Avram Ignatov (*Plenty of Time to Think*), Mariana Evsatieva (*School Leavers, Peter Beron, Children and Dolls*), Vesselina Gerinska (*What Party? Where to?*) are young directors with an established creative manner, whose best films have recorded peaks in the studio's artistic achievement.

On the whole, the Bulgarian short film has witnessed a lot of experimenting, especially in the last few years. Yet there is room for more,

since the form of the short itself, and the smaller amount of funds invested in these films offer artists excellent opportunities to try out new ideas.

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Twenty years are a period too short for traditions to become established in a national cinematography. Without such traditions, without recognized authorities and model works in the field, the individual achievements of isolated personalities (the most important Bulgarian films tend to appear as just such works) often suffer from casual shortcomings and flaws, the result of immaturity and inexperience. But the years of development of the Bulgarian cinema — the 'fifties and 'sixties of the twentieth century — were also a period of active experimenting and rapid changes in world cinema. While in the 'twenties and 'thirties trends and schools in cinema appeared to last for ten years and more, today they are born much more spontaneously, are represented by more numerous films and artists, only to disappear in about five years' time. They are replaced by new trends, and we speak more and more often of a certain director's own kind of cinema — the cinema of Bergman, Antonioni or Godard. Film styles are developing not by years, but by days. As a leading film specialist once said, world cinema is striding fast towards its zenith, to the full blossoming of its potentialities, which is still ahead of it.

What is, then, the way of future development for a national cinematography, like that of Bulgaria? Naturally, constant contact with the traditions of the national theatre and primarily literature should be the leading factor in the se-

lection of subject-matter. It should also set the trend of the film-makers' stylistic quests. But no less important is an orientation in the trends of world cinema, the response to the characteristic events and moods of the period, the treatment of problems of key importance for the present day, for all mankind, determining the outlook of all the inhabitants of our planet. For there is no art more international in scope and more concrete and powerful in its impact on millions of people than the cinema.

An encouraging fact in the Bulgarian cinema is the constant influx into it of young artists with a deep love of the cinema, with varying views and often widely differing personalities. More and more films have recently roused lively discussions and have prompted the hope that the future will bring the masterpieces which will be a proof of creative maturity. The Bulgarian cinema is an open page. . .

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